

The effect of dualism on gender roles portrayed in film production

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Abstract. This paper examines the mechanism by which dualism, gender roles, and films interact with each other across three fields. It draws on Lacan's mirror stage theory to elaborate on how the opposition between males and females is formed and gradually triggers gender roles, where the yin-yang theory of Eastern philosophy is not considered to play a significant role in the interaction. The thesis further stresses the view that problematic gender stereotypes are pervasive in narrative films and genre films. Gender inequality in the casting of film protagonists, gender-stereotypical performances, and the objectification of women by the camera undermine the unity of humanity and indoctrinate people with gender norms. By offering a review of previous research on dualism and gender roles, the study suggests that dualism contributes to gender roles, which are then reinforced in films and entrench spectators' dualistic thinking. Breaking this vicious circle requires a joint effort from filmmakers and spectators.

Keywords: Dualism, Gender roles, Stereotypes, Films.

1. Introduction

As one of the most controversial and widely used theories in academia, dualism (or binary) has permeated gender studies and the construction of film characters in the industry. The significance of dualism in philosophy, history, economics, and politics needs no further emphasis; it establishes an order in the complex and dynamic cultural context and everyday life to facilitate cultural construction and practice. Nevertheless, the classification of things has been monopolized by dualism (culture and nature, good and evil, rich and poor, conservatives and libertarians), with its violent, crude, and divisive nature being widely criticized, especially on its reinforcement of gender stereotypes in today's society. People are set a specific and rigid set of rules from birth on how they are supposed to behave based on their sex, which has long been deepened through films over time. Masculinity and femininity are deemed exclusive to a specific group, imposing pressure on both sexes while ignoring and discarding all individuals that do not conform to the established demands of gender roles [1]. The oppression imposed by dualism should not be overlooked as it creates so much prejudice and discrimination that should not exist and greatly hinders personal growth.

Despite the fact that considerable literature has grown up around the themes of dualism, gender roles, and film production in recent years, the interplay of all three has been rarely discussed. The importance and originality of this study lie in the fact that it provides new insights into a mechanism crossing three academic fields (philosophy, gender studies, and film studies) and the exploration of measures breaking the underlying vicious circle. It enhances the alertness of spectators towards the existence of dualism and gender stereotypes that abound in cinemas while encouraging them to employ the 'distancing effect' technique while watching films [2].

The thesis is composed of four main chapters: Abstract, Introduction, Analysis, and Conclusion. The remaining part of the paper begins with explicit definitions of the key terms involved and relevant renowned research. It will then go on to a detailed explanation of the interaction of the three elements, articulating the causal relationships between them. A summary of key information and suggestions is given at the end.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Definition of Dualism

Dualism can be loosely defined as an antithesis between two fundamental things or principles, which argues that the world essentially comprises a variety of antithetical relationships. Dualists always split things into two separate parts and downplay the concept of neutrality in their thinking. Dualism, monism, and pluralism are often discussed together. The former rejects any form of division and argues that all is one, that there is a unified nature or source for all things, while the latter recognizes diversity. Specifically, the definition of dualism has nuanced differences in different fields, with the most heated debate arising in the Philosophy of Mind. The opposition between mind and body was first proposed by René Descartes in the 17th century (Substance Dualism or Cartesian Dualism), in which the soul is considered immaterial and spatially unextended, independent of the material body but with a unique interaction between the two [3]. Although introspective experience reminds people that the interaction between mind and body does exist (bodily experience can be perceived by the mind, and the mind can influence the body), there is still a lack of objective and valid evidence of how immaterial and material things impact upon each other [4]. With Plato and Aristotle as pioneers, the argument as to whether the mind and body really exist and in what form, and the casual interaction between them, has never ceased, but no clear conclusion has been reached until today.

The archetype of the dualist view can be traced back to theology and religion thousands of years ago, serving as the core of many myths and beliefs. The dualistic mindset is often conveyed by creating two powerful (often world-dominating) rival forces, with one symbolizing light, pure goodness, and justice, and the other dark, sinful, and destructive [4]. The most widely known opposition between Osiris and Set in ancient Egyptian religion illustrates this vividly, where Osiris is portrayed as a great and benign sovereign dressed in a white linen gown and in charge of order, fertility, agriculture, the afterlife, resurrection, and vegetation, while Set is associated with greed, violence, and disorder, with the face of an enigmatic black beast [5]. As the Egyptian religion fell into decline and was gradually replaced by Christianity rising from the Roman Empire, a similar opposition emerged between the iconic God and Satan. Moreover, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman (Angra Mainyu) also repeated this same setting in the Ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism that was active around the middle of the fifth century BCE [6]. Later, dualism in myths, legends, and religions was no longer merely about good or evil qualities, but extended to nature, such as males and females, day and night, summer and winter, and even the universe.

2.2 The Definition of Gender Roles

Gender roles are socially constructed fantasies for males and females based on human anatomical differences, which have been so embedded in human society for so long that people have already become completely enslaved to them without even realizing it. In this illusion, men and women are assigned specific characteristics and are expected to behave according to stereotypical gender norms. Specifically, men are supposed to be strong, confident, rational, aggressive, rough, and athletic, while women are perceived as soft, emotional, unintelligent, patient, and subjugated. Gender roles have begun to invade the smallest details, such as people's hobbies, preferred colors, clothing, and even voice. As they continue to be embedded in people's brains with little resistance, the domestic division of labor and many jobs have become exclusively male or female, with women awaiting to give up their careers to stay at home for child-rearing and men bearing the financial burden of earning money to support the family. In addition, women are deemed ineligible to be leaders and are required to be subservient to their male counterparts. In terms of career pursuits, women should pursue careers such as art and nursing, while men work with machinery and data. These ingrained gender roles place a great mental burden on people. When females feel trapped in their societal roles, males are paralyzed in sharing their shame, insecurities, and vulnerability. Many people who are marginalized and seen

as inferior because they do not fit the established gender roles feel confined and suffocated and even end their lives by suicide.

In Japanese culture, Seppuku means an elaborate and detailed ritual suicide by disembowelment, which is often performed voluntarily by Japanese samurai [7]. The nerves in the abdomen are so dense that one has to endure severe pain for a long time during Seppuku. Therefore, it has long been regarded by Japanese samurai as the most honorable way to die, proving one's courage and dignity in the face of death. This masochistic form of suicide might have some connection with gender roles, which require men to maintain their masculinity even while dying.

In 1990, the famous feminist philosopher Judith Butler groundbreakingly introduced the term 'gender performativity' in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which suggests that the gender people are born with does not determine their preferences and behavior and that people are actually molded into a particular gender by society through constant brainwashing and redress [8].

3. Analysis

3.1 Dualism and Gender

When the fundamental idea of dualism, which divides things into two extremes, invades the mindset of people, gender automatically becomes its major target due to the duality it possesses (male and female). Gender is no longer merely a tool that distinguishes between the recipient and the donor in human reproduction, but rather a signifier that carries prejudices that have lingered for years in a social and cultural context. To be more specific, reproductive organs (vagina and phallus) turn into a source of pressure and anxiety, imposing pressure on both binary and non-binary gender groups by stressing the irreconcilable differentness rooted in the material body of organisms. Cartesian dualism forces people to face the brutal fact that 'bodies were territorialized in certain ways and treated as sources of scientific evidence about perversion' [9]. The violent and arbitrary division of dualism undermines the integrity and unity of human beings because of the imperceptible fact that people tend to be seen as male and female acutely before they are viewed as human in everyday life. Differences in human anatomy impel them to move in opposite directions since birth, dividing them into two camps where the conflict is flaming and the signs of misogyny, misandry, androphobia, and gynophobia even spawn through the processing of media and other factors.

Until humans evolved from a primitive state of unconscious group living to a small society, gender was solely one of the many attributes of organisms set by nature, participating only in the reproductive process without any derived influence. However, as human societies became increasingly complex, there was a need to unify the chaotic and diversified sexual differences among humans through abstract language to facilitate socialization. In this way, the signifying of gender appears to be inevitable in human history. As males were the first to be marked as such, they were desperate to find a metaphysical basis for their sexual identity. When no metaphysical evidence could be found, they found a substitute, a physical carrier (phallus), which might be the start of phallogocentrism. Moreover, the absence of the other as a reference makes males feel insecure about their gender identity and status, which leads them back into the mania of finding an opposite to justify their existence. Coincidentally, they find a group, that is, females who are biologically devoid of the phallus, and immediately take them out as a counterpart, projecting the difference between the sexes onto the differences in sexual organs. This pure contingency is misunderstood by males as powerful evidence of their gender identity. In other words, the sense of a unified self for males is acquired through the existence of females. Distinguishing themselves from women helps them feel more existential.

The idea of reinforcing self-awareness through the identification or establishment of the other does not come out of nowhere. A classic example is the mirror theory, first proposed by Jacques Lacan at the Fourteenth International Psychoanalytical Congress in 1936 [10]. The concept of the mirror stage was expounded in a paper published in 1949, in which Lacan stated that infants between 6 months and 18 months do not have a sense of self until after they encounter their mirror image. Prior to this,

they are simply in a state of disorder driven by need, called the 'Real Stage.' Lacking a perception of the self and the other, they are unaware of the rudimentary distinction between themselves and objects around them, such as toys. During this stage, what they have is only 'bits and pieces' experiences and are not yet capable of forming a unified, coherent whole self-image by linking all these memory fragments [11]. The bodies and images they picture of themselves are, therefore, in parts. It is not until infants see their reflection in the mirror and gradually recognize themselves through repeated verification that an epiphany occurs, making them suddenly aware of their existence. Since then, an illusionary image has replaced their true self. Identifying with the mirror image is a crucial moment of socializing for marking one's real entry into the symbolic order or lifelong process of identifying signifiers. Although this mirror image is a misrecognition, as Lacan put it, 'the armor of an alienating identity,' having a completed, coherent, stable self-image is much easier to adapt to society than being chaotic, as the process of being accustomed to things labeled less accurately is an inevitable step of socialization.

Even though there are some doubts and criticisms of Lacan's mirror stage theory (such as those from Cornelius Castoriadis, Anthony Elliott, and Norman N. Holland [12-14]), it is indeed true that such opposing and co-existing inconsistencies are not an exception among things. As Nasrullah Mambrol (2016) states: 'To exist one has to be recognized by an-other. We are at once dependent on the other as the guarantor of our own existence and a bitter rival to that same other' [13]. The self-identity the infant gains through its mirror image is essentially the same thing as the antithesis established by males with females for their gender identity. That is to say, females play the role of a mirror image for males, and by attaching to it, males build an imaginary self.

The duality between males and females reinforces the influence of gender on people and casts a deeper shadow on them. In order to draw a sharper line between each other, there is a need to create more differences. Hence, no longer satisfied with physical differences, the mindset of antitheses invades people's social lives. Everything is categorized as 'male' or 'female,' and people can only get their part. People are restricted to two territories according to gender, while all those who step out or try to blur the boundaries are regarded as weird and excluded by society. During this prolonged acclimatization, people seem to develop a kind of learned helplessness and become gradually accustomed to and even dependent on the ubiquitous gender stereotypes in their lives. Meanwhile, once the ideology of antithesis is established and constantly reinforced, the balance and equality of things are replaced by a vertical hierarchy where two fundamental kinds or categories of things or principles are subconsciously ranked and compared. Within the hierarchy, one is considered superior and the other inferior, such as black-white, oppressed-oppressor, mentally ill-normal, and able-bodied-disabled, which is not an exception when discussing gender. When the two sexes lose the opportunity to coexist in harmony and liberty, a structured and unjust system of male domination (a patriarchal society) is quietly constructed.

Duality is also often associated with a central concept in Chinese Taoism, yin-yang, which indicates that everything in nature operates as an interaction between two opposite forces, such as the rising and setting of the sun, the rising and falling of tides, and the growth and decay of plants. Everything can be described as either yin or yang, with yang representing the harder, stronger, brighter, and faster one [15]. Granted, some argue that yin and yang heavily influence the formation of masculinity and femininity [16]. A strong argument for this is that masculinity is described as yang in Chinese and femininity as yin, which reinforces the stereotype of women as soft and sentimental while men are strong and confident. However, yin and yang in Eastern philosophy are not totally opposite but relative to each other. The yin-yang theory emphasizes the transformation and interconnection of two forces more than their opposition. In Taoism, the universe consists of energies, vibrations, and matter, which means yin and yang coexist in a fluid world or dynamic system in which the two may be transformed into each other at any time, being fluid instead of fixed. The flux or fusion of yin and yang is best demonstrated in a traditional Chinese martial art, Tai chi, which is characterized by gentle, slow movements and the stretching of the body. Moreover, they are supposed to be driven by internal power, not constrained or suppressed, like the gender roles forced upon people.

The aforementioned are all clearly indicated by the yin-yang symbol, in which the black swirl is called yin, and the white one is called yang. Each swirl has a dot of the opposite color. Thus, gender roles are not strongly linked with the yin-yang theory.

3.2 Gender Roles in Film Production

Intentionally or unintentionally, the film industry has created countless characters with gender stereotypes. In mainstream narrative cinema, female stereotypes are often established by employing two strategies: positioning them as foils for male characters and objectifying them for visual pleasure. A notable fact is that women in cinema often play subordinate roles to male characters, such as someone's wife and mother, or minor roles with jobs stereotypically assumed by women (such as nurses, assistants, and teachers). They only exist because women's societal roles are briefly called upon in the story and do not significantly influence the film's plot. Thus, it seems they are present yet invisible; they are noisy yet silent. As tools serving to fill the background, they are depersonalized in film production and are not entitled to any character arc. The absence of female protagonists on screen implies that their stories have long been ignored and belittled. Men have taken a stranglehold on the group that makes up nearly half of humanity in the film industry (both on and off screen), depriving them of this forum to share their stories, ideas, and the issues they may face in society. The dazzling array of male stories in the cinematic world reinforces people's blind worship of men while brainwashing them with the stereotype of women as silent, submissive, and dispensable. By contrast, the objectification of women under the male gaze in films seems to be a more serious topic, one that binds women and femininity more closely together. By unnecessarily filming women's bodies, fragmenting their bodies with close-ups, and lingering on their bodies for a disturbingly long time, the camera puts women at a dead end, as if being sexy is the only way to fulfill their value and be charming. The presence of erotic meaning in the film is not the problem, but rather the imbalance between men and women in charge of the scenarios with sexual connotations. Furthermore, the sexualized female characters' lack of self-awareness and their frenzy to please men are also problematic. They do not react to the unbridled male gaze and seem to take it for granted, such as Lola Lola, played by Marlene Dietrich in *The Blue Angel*. In some cases, a man's success is even shown by how many scantily dressed women he is surrounded by, which certainly exemplifies the fact that women are sexualized in film. One of Laura Mulvey's representative works, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975, first discussed the opposition between men and women in film [17]. She stated that visual pleasure in cinema is shown in two ways: one that men get from actively looking, and the other that women get from being looked at. Women's bodies are scrutinized by the camera, other characters in the film, and spectators behind the screen. The contrast between the darkness of the viewing environment and the brilliantly vibrant colors on screen creates an alienation for the spectator, which induces voyeurism about the female characters' bodies. Interestingly, male obsession with female bodies is sometimes presented in a voyeuristic way directly in the film by hiding the camera in a secret corner out of sight of the characters [17]. The fact that the majority of the few opportunities for women to appear in the film are sexually suggestive is disturbing; it portrays women as unintelligent and sex-driven.

Problematic gender stereotypes can also be found in genre films. In action films, women are often the ones waiting to be rescued. They are easily in trouble and unable to do anything helpful by themselves. By overcoming all the obstacles to save their loved ones, the male characters' masculinity is well-embodied. However, male characters in horror films tend to act overly foolish and reckless. Even though the female characters already notice the signs of impending danger and give constant reminders, the minor characters played by men remain oblivious and die of overconfidence and boldness soon afterward. In science fiction films, women are locked within their domestic roles. After a woman becomes a mother, raising children seems to be the only thing left to do in her life. Thus, when female characters lose their children (whether in the short or long term) in films, they are engulfed in great sorrow and futility for a surprising amount of time, whereas fathers always show less reaction or are even absent in the face of the same crisis. The elaborate science fiction films of

recent years, *Gravity*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and *Arrival*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, both feature elements of women and their deceased children [18]. The fact that women tend to be more attached to their children because they physically give birth should not be an excuse. It is misleading to leave female characters onscreen bearing the pain of child loss alone for a better dramatic effect. The over-bonding of mother and child onscreen strengthens the burden of the feminine role of a mother while freeing fathers of their responsibilities.

Not all films help build gender stereotypes, and those that rebel against the deeply entrenched gender norms are being made. A growing number of people are beginning to reflect on the gender stereotypes that have long been perpetuated in human society, including filmmakers. In *Sinking Sands*, the female protagonist shouts, 'All I am now is your glorified house help and sex toy' during a confrontation with her disappointing partner [18]. The act of realizing the imposed feminine role and smashing it is uplifting and significant because the awareness of gender roles reflected in the film can inspire both male and female spectators off-screen. Similarly, *The Hours* distinguished itself from the regular Hollywood type of drama film by delving into this rarely discussed but profound topic. It links up a day in the lives of three women living in different times, unraveling the perpetual ennui and depression created by their feminine roles. It shows no subservience and inferiority of women living in a patriarchal system, nor any sexual connotations. It renders cinematic pleasure not obtained through gazing at women's bodies and eroticizing them through the lens. Women are able to vocalize; they move from the background to the foreground, from the invisible to the tangible, from the abstract to the concrete, and from submissive to thoughtful. However, attempts to dismantle the structuralized dualism of males and females are still not enough in the film industry. It is up to those involved to give up unnecessary illusions about gender and work together to challenge these long-standing gender roles that plague people.

4. Conclusion

The aim of the present research was to examine how gender roles are derived under the manipulation of dualism and consolidated by films. It has argued that the differences in human reproductive organs are the origin of the gender binary. As Lacan suggests in his mirror stage theory that infants develop a sense of self and others by identifying with their mirror image, male gender identity is established by seeing women without a phallus as opposites. When anatomical differences fail to drive the opposition between males and females, gender roles are created as instruments to continue widening the gender gap. The findings of this research provide insights into overcoming gender roles. It is indicated that conscious efforts of people to identify and diminish the effects of gender and dualism are necessary to free themselves from the entrapment of gender stereotypes. When people become accustomed to seeing and treating each other in terms of humans rather than men and women, the antithesis of gender ceases. Ultimately, gender roles can be deconstructed and replaced by individual differences. The research has also shown that both mainstream narrative and genre films are involved in constructing problematic gender stereotypes. In narrative films, both males and females are underrepresented in dramatic and stereotypical performances. While male protagonists are prioritized in film production, women as secondary characters are portrayed in two problematic ways: as male subordinates or as sexualized objects lacking subjectivity. In genre films, males' images are reinforced as reckless and tough, while females are confined to the role of mother and labeled as weak and incompetent. The results of this research support the idea that the number of men and women in leading roles needs to be more balanced, and more diverse characters should be included. Both filmmakers and spectators should be alert to gender roles to prevent them from continually poisoning people's minds. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work offers valuable insights into the interconnectedness of philosophy, gender studies, and the media. Future work could focus on the comparative study of gender stereotypes in films from different cultural backgrounds or shed light on the interaction of new media and gender roles beyond film to move the debate forward.

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