

The Construction and Reconstruction of Female Characters in Postmodern Films: *B for Busy* and *Her Story*

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Abstract. The paper investigates the reconstruction of women's screen images in postmodern cinema in the context of gender revolution shaped by postmodern philosophy. Based on the analysis of specific cinema works, such as the *B for Busy* and *Her Story*, the paper applies the semiotics of film, Foucauldian discourse theory, and Mulvey's gaze theory to explore how such works break down the classical myths of femininity, overturn the binarity, and restore the narrative and audiovisual femininity. The findings obtained reveals that the approach of deromanticizing and reversing the gaze of the filmmaker enhances the narrative role of females, but the mechanisms induced by the commercialization of cinema works result in placing women within symbolic traps, with feminism reduced to the level of commodities. The conclusion arrived at points out that, although postmodern cinema makes important contributions to reshaping femininity discourse, one must be careful not to be entrapped in the oppositional discourse embedded in the capital mechanism.

Keywords: Male gaze, Gender reconstruction, Postmodern film, Female characters.

1. Introduction

A quiet yet radical gender transformation influenced by postmodernist theories is reshaping contemporary philosophical and literary discourse, and this shift is beginning to alter the narrative logic of cinema. The relationship between women and the cultural myth of love has become a central site where these transformations manifest.

According to Archie, the primary aim of her first film was to expose the constructed nature of the love myth, whereas the second aimed to articulate a more truthful representation of women's lived experiences, as seen in *B for Busy* (2021) and *Her Story* (2024). These works are foundational for understanding the ongoing crisis of gender narrative in postmodern cinema.

These narrative and aesthetic strategies aim to disrupt the long-standing representational frameworks that confine female characters. Specifically, they challenge two dominant gender myths in cinema: the sacrifice-for-love narrative and the binary depiction of women as either virtuous saints or dangerous femme fatales.

In order to meet the objectives of this study, the paper examines the following three questions. First, how do contemporary postmodern films employ techniques such as narrative fragmentation, alienation effects, irony, and bricolage to deconstruct the traditional love myth and the associated gender binaries in cinema? Second, how does this deconstruction generate new visual and narrative configurations of femininity and female desire in such cinema? Moreover, what is the broader significance of these reconstructions, and what dilemmas emerge when postmodern cinematic strategies confront entrenched paradigms of gender representation?

2. Narrative Strategies for Deconstructing Gender Myths

The patriarchal ideology has a profound effect on social structures and cultural traditions. Under such an ideology, women in general remain mute and even their weakest voices get lost in the flood of history. Foucault argues for the need for a discursive transformation of the conventional roles of women so that women can shift from occupying the position of the "passive other" to becoming active "subject" who redefine the boundaries of their historical definition and limitation [1]. The post-modern cinema constructs a multi-faceted imagery of females through the systematic transformation

of romantic myths and by challenging the conventional formation of the “gender” schema. This becomes apparent not only in narrative contents, but also in the diversified expressiveness of cinema. As Hegel notes, humanity constitutes the true center of ideal art [2]. Referring to *B for Busy*, the film removes the mythic filter of love stories by offering more nuanced character portrayals. Rather than presenting Lao-Bai as the conventionally idealized “artist” embodying lofty ideals of love and life, the film shows him caught in mundane realities—scavenging in a narrow kitchen or rushing to switch on a light bulb—actions that undermine the mythic aura typically attached to artistic identity. Through such emphases on everyday realities, he lost all traces of the mythic “artist.” Under traditional patriarchy, women were denied access to artistic labor. However, with shifting social realities, postmodern cinema has gradually distanced itself from the mythological narrative that positions women as the “Second Sex” within a self-referential framework. By exploring transcending paths connected with space, identity, and desire, post-modern cinema participates in constructing the modern female subject [3].

On the other hand, the play also employs the Ms. Li figure in an attempt to represent the multifaceted identity of modern urban women. Her decisive professional persona in the advertising firm contrasts with her emotional vulnerability as a single mother, revealing the tension between personal resilience and structural constraints. When, in particular, she rejects Lao Bai’s kind offer to move into his flat, signifies a deliberate rejection of the traditional provider-dependent relationship, thus challenging patriarchal expectations regarding female reliance on male support. Again, in her languid pose, cigarette in hand, leaning against the window with her face partly shrouded in mist, the filmmaker chooses to focus closely on her face.

Secondly, the character design of Gloria carries clear theatrical intent. Introduced through her missing husband situation, the narrative is inverted by her self-referential litany of justified purposes, emphasizing her autonomy and wit. This is portrayed in the KTV setting, where her red chuckle necklace visually dominates the scene, asserting her presence. Her acts of consumption, such as purchasing the Lao Bai portrait, are used to demonstrate her control over cultural and symbolic capital. Consequently, the conversion of economic capital into cultural capital subverts male supremacy, which often dominates gendered artistic representation. Similarly, subversion occurs in the narrative and position of Beibei. Her line, claiming she merely repeated a common male mistake, subtly subverts patriarchal discourse in rationalizing her actions. The result in the play, therefore, is the objectification of the males in their specific narrative.

On the theoretical level, such cinematographic practice also represents a reaction to the visual theory proposed by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey argued in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* that classical film positions the camera from the male perspective, rendering women as objects of male visual pleasure. Under such circumstances, women lose physical autonomy, becoming mere objects of male desire [4]. Beyond dismantling the classical male-gaze paradigm, postmodern cinema establishes women’s discursive authority by reconstructing their subjective perspective. In *B for Busy*, hermetic spaces—such as women’s internal dialogues in cafes and KTV booths—create realms largely insulated from masculine intrusion. Moreover, the three-minute internal dialogue between women in *Her Story* produces an intense sense observational effect, compelling the audience to experience a disruptive shift in perspective. This transference of narrative perspective is not just a technical achievement, but also symbolizes a philosophical critique of patriarchal film language, affirming women as producers, rather than passive recipients, of meaning and asserting their agency through articulate discourse. Therefore, the extension of narrative elements from private female spaces into public cinematic discourse symbolizes a critical reconstruction of hermetic paradigms within patriarchal cinema.

3. Paths and Tension in the Reconstruction of Female Subjectivity in *Her Story*

Postmodern cinema reveals an interesting dialectical tendency in its representation of women. It emphasizes women’s determination to build self-defining activity, along with an awareness of an

almost stoic tone regarding the process of such constitution. On the audiovisual level, the concept of audible culture involves an expansive and inclusive attitude toward the external world and the Other. The aesthetic activity, understood as a dialogue between the subject and the object, also necessitates such expansiveness [5]. In contrast to the relatively light tonal quality of *B for Busy*, the film *Her Story* adopts a introspective approach, foregrounding the protagonist's internal conflicts as a woman. This internal struggle is articulated through key visual strategies that highlights the protagonist's gradual liberation from her marriage. *Her Story*, demonstrates a further disintegration of the traditional oppositional gender discourse through highly distinctive cinematographic techniques. The filmmaker makes continuous usage of the gritty texture of 16mm film to achieve the contrast between crucial visual elements and the mundane, oppressive atmosphere of marriage of marriage. The protagonist's direct talk to the camera, in statements of "I am not your perfect victim", breaks the dramatic fourth wall and invites the audience to act as interlocutors rather than passive spectators. In the dining table negotiations sequence, the film strategically employs lens language to visually undermine established power relationship. The sequence involves commencing with the conventional two-shot format. However, it gradually shifts to low-angle close-ups that highlight the female protagonist's facial contours through sculptural up-lighting, thereby increasing the intensity of her verbal and emotional presence. On the other side, her husband is progressively marginlized from the frame, reduced to the off-screen space, and eventually blurred in their background. Such gradual technical shift in cinematographic power visually manifest the restructuring of gender-power. Furthermore, in the "unraveling marriage connection" sequence, the film continues this visual application. Close-shots emphasize the protagonist's physical gestures, while the amplified tearing sound—resonating with significant acoustic weight—symbolizes her psychological and relational emancipation. The contrast between her calm facial expression and her decisive movement overturns the conventional narrative trope that associates women's anger at the demise of marriage. The coding of her physical response reveals the empowerment of women's control over their own expression.

The narrative of economic independence is also endowed with a deeper meaning. They Made *Her Story* describes the challenges faced by women in entrepreneurship through abundant specifics. When the protagonist Wang Tiemei is asked in a group discussion how she balances family responsibilites and career demands, the camera slowly zooms in on the coffee cup in her hands. The shot accentuates the moisture on the cup's surface and the slight tremble in her fingers and voice---a subtle disclosure of the body sharply contrasts with her outward composure. Later, the montage show integrates details of raw-material procurement, production management, and promotional activities. Rather than playing inspirational musicial cues, the sequence relies entirely on direct recording of atmosphere---the hum of machines, the tapping keys, and the late-night rain --- thereby crafting an auditory portrait of women's entrepreneurial labor. Through this unembellished representation, economic independence is reframed from an abstract slogan into the concrete, multifaceted reality of women's daily living. Indeed, economic independence, often regarded as the initial stage of modern women's liberation, provides the critical opportunity for women to transcend the constraints of social discipline. It enables autonomous choices in conditions of subsistence and facilitates a transition from passive acceptance to active self-determination [6].

However, the most conceptually innovative dimention lies in the film's representation of spiritual reconstruction. This is achieved in *Her Story* via a dialectical approach in three conversations between the protagonist and her mother. The first dialogue features the typical shot-reverse-shot sequence, while in the second, the deep-space approach is realized in one shot, and in the third, the mother and daughter are positioned in separate visual domains. Worth noticing is that is *Her Story* does not position the mother within the stereotypical role of an accomplice to patriarchal ideology. patriarchal ideology. This is particularly evident when she gazes at an old graduation photograph from her girls' school. The moment functions as an implicit acknowledgment of her unrealized youthful aspirations, thereby situating her not as a passive transmitter of patriarchal norms but as a subject with her own history of constrained possibilities.

Thus, as a mirror text that represents the collective psyche of society, *Her Story* embodies a symptomatic cultural artifact. When the audience oscillate between their emergent feminist consciousness and their expectations shaped by conventional cinematic genres, the resulting discrepancies in aesthetic judgement indicates that the gender discourse in modern Chinese society is undergoing a profound paradigm shift [7]. The intensity of such change is further reflected in the refusal to recast traditional constraints into a new form of idealized perfectionism. *Her Story* emphasizes the constructed myth of the independent woman through its focus on multiple moments of vulnerability and perceived failure. These moments include the prolonged shot of her vomiting in the warehouse stripped of the markers of all her entrepreneurial success, the subjective shot in which she is visually marginalized amid the celebratory crowd at the victory banquet, and the metaphorically dense closing shot in which, despite finally purchasing the long-desired apartment, she still ends up sleeping habitually on the couch. These scenes collectively articulate the unresolved tension within postmodern feminism, wherein the dismantling of external constraints does not automatically yield immediate personal liberation. Instead, older forms of restriction persist in shaping women's psychological experiences. Thus, the iconic shot of intersection in the concluding part of *Her Story* carries multiple levels of meaning, where women's breakthroughs over their rights are accompanied by new uncertainties, and liberation from traditional restrictions also introduces anxieties generated out of newly emergent conditions. Consequently, the existential dimension of *Her Story* opens up the most productive potential in such postmodern feminism, where resides the assertion of the self along with a critical alertness against the certainty of all things, acknowledging both the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in process of liberation.

4. Significance and Contradictions of Postmodern Feminist Films

Postmodern cinema has made notable breakthroughs in defining women's images in terms of overcoming stereotypes. Films such as *B for Busy* bring new dynamism to female representation by foregrounding their complex identity. However, one must not ignore the fact that, under the influence of market economy, women-themed works might be confronted with certain dilemmas when attempts to rebuild gender paradigm.

"What makes *Her Story* highly distinctive, then, is its refusal to problematize the modern woman's situation, since the object of critique here is not any specific function but the wider nonsensical and unjust paradigm, atmosphere, and disciplinary system characteristic of patriarchal societies" [8]. Through her interactions with people of the other gender and other statuses in the contextual of her entrepreneurial endeavors, more complex gendered realities can be constructed. Through the investment capital negotiations, an objective view can be projected, with the masculine viewpoint implied both in the question "How do you balance work and family" and in the broader capital-driven logic of entrepreneurship. Even with such a presentation, the narrative notably avoids labeling one side—specifically men—as "oppressors". Rather, the work hints at more complex interdependencies between gender and other social issues. In other cinematic works, however, gender is often presented in a more flattened, oppositional manner... Indeed, such works might also construct antipathies toward women through rigid framing techniques. They might also demonstrate mechanical mental constructs when imagining gendered antagonisms. *Her Story*, by contrast, astutely avoids such tendencies and instead highlights complementary relations between genders. It thus offers greater narrative depth to female characters within cinematic storytelling. In this sense, it contributes to what has been called "the most powerful, depth-structuring representation of female consciousness in cinematic narrative" [9]. The work also acknowledges the layered pressures women face and the complex alliances and tensions that emerge among female characters across different cinematic narratives.

However, the current situation is reshaping the way such complexity is manifested. Jacques Lacan famously claimed that woman does not exist, a statement reflecting his structuralist psychoanalytic position. He argued that due to the historical dominance of lineage-based male supremacy, the entire social symbolic order operates under phallogocentric logic [10]. Films such as *Lost in the Stars* (2023)

tend to exaggerate the gender opposition in their promotional activities, reducing the analytical depth of feminist perspectives and using gender issues primarily for emotional stimulation. These works often portray men through symbolic associations with evil while positioning women as embodiments of justice. This approach, although profitable in the short term, risks further damaging public perceptions of women. Moreover, such storytelling might intensify gender tensions in society. Even worse, it tends to isolate feminism by reducing it to an emotionally consumable product. Thus, the critical meaning of feminism may be marginalized as it becomes incorporated into commercialized forms. Such phenomenon presents a major dilemma in postmodern feminist filmmaking: balancing new artistic expressions with the risk of reinforcing stereotypes. If the notion of the independent woman becomes merely a commercial label, and the theme of rejecting marriage becomes a genre trope, their meaning becomes increasingly ambiguous. This raises the question of whether such trends signal the emergence of new symbolic mechanisms. If the critical meaning of feminism can be commercialized within capitalist discourse, feminism may be reduced to another symbolic commodity. This is illustrated by a shot in *Her Story*, in which the protagonist—despite approaching financial independence—finds her image appropriated and rebranded in advertising discourse as the Goddess of Entrepreneurship.

5. Conclusion

This paper concludes that there have been marked breakthroughs in the reinvention of the female protagonist in postmodern cinema. The significance of such breakthroughs extends beyond artistic innovation, and profoundly affects the socio-cultural domain. Through micro-narratives and a politics of visual representation, such reinvention has, to some degree, reshaped traditional constructions of the male gaze, in turn, constructed a new cultural space. But, importantly, in their pursuit of liberation, such works exhibit reflexivity in their departure from both the traditional stereotypes and newly emerging symbolic traps. However, in contemporary postmodern cinema, feminist filmmaking also encounters certain dilemmas. Thus, by accentuating gender opposition, some works risk oversimplifying complex matters. Indeed, such phenomenon reveals a deep contradiction: as feminist discourse gains prominence, to what extent might it become alienated as a symbolic construct? This study contributes meaningfully by showing further directions for related studies. The image of crossroads at the conclusion of *Her Story* means such predicaments and ultimately suggests that liberation is an ongoing narrative process.

The reconstruction of women's images in postmodern cinema has achieved great success, but it also faces ever more challenging tasks. Thus, in order to truly promote the cultural practice of women's equality, it is important to seek, between artistic creativity and social responsibility, a balance. This is the task of cinema artistic creation, but also the mission of contemporary women's studies.

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