

Reflection on the Postmodernism in Female Identity and the Reconstruction of Female Identity Through Digital Media

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Abstract

Inspired by postmodern culture and as a result of the self-consciousness and subject agency being awakened and enhanced, the female has earned far more choices over their own identities and partially broken the stereotype of being obedient. Attributable to the inevitable impact of digital media on the recipients' ideology and its nature of quick communication, digital media while describing and forming the standard of female image has significantly contributed to the reconstruction of women's identities in the modern times. Hence, this research will further elaborate on how well digital media could promote the reconstruction of female identity and the diversification of female image against the wave of postmodernism.

Keywords: postmodernism, female image, identity reconstruction, digital media communication

1. Introduction

In the middle and late 20th century, the idea of postmodernism originated from the pessimism theory represented by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Arthur Schopenhauer, the criticism theory developed by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, the branch of Marxism by Frankfurt School and the neo-Marxism criticized the defects of modernity, overturned the idea of essentialism and forwarded the development of reconstructionism, which agreed perfectly with the arousal of the female's self-consciousness. When women started to play actively in choosing social identity instead of staying passive, postmodernism in turn extended further explanation and critical interpretation on the images presented by visual culture. At the same time, digital media stepped into a new era when the independent and anti-conventional female image got widely advocated and presented in a new style featuring permanent changing. For instance, the existing image could be changed to generate a new one or the new image got fitted into the old one, by which postmodernism expounded on the fragmentation, reconstruction and fragility of postmodern identities. Images shown on media has greatly impacted the modern society by providing models and patterns of identity reconstruction to individuals who in such specific, contradictory and fragile situation have no choice but to respond to and experience the changes and reconstruction (Abrudan, 2011).

2. Image and Identity

Image being the carrier of culture is in close relations with identity, without which reconstruction of identity can never be achieved. Since the ancient times there has always existed stereotype for male and female as to their images. Such as in the western religions, male being the absolute limelight is always endowed with power and carries the hope of rebirth and salvation, while female is negligible and dependent on the male for survival. The Christian doctrine however is well known for its two major negative comments on female: one is to regard female as the root of evil as supported by the story in the Genesis Chapter of Bible that the reason for human being expelled from the Garden of Eden is that Eve stole and ate the forbidden fruit, which is all women's fault;

and the other is that female is an extension of male and was created by God as nothing but a companion (Luo, 2013). In the traditional patriarchal families evolved to this day, men are still playing indispensable and significant roles by acting as the supreme authority and holding the absolute power of speech regardless of how less they have contributed to the family. Their counterparts, namely the women, however are playing the roles of free domestic workers, nurturers, breeders and subordinates.

Another demonstration of the stereotype is that female images are always created from masculine perspectives, as John Berger puts in the *Ways of Seeing* that “men take actions, then women show up; women are gazed at by men and see themselves being gazed at, which determines not only the relations between men and women, but that between women themselves” (Berger, 1990). Female image came into being as a result of male gaze and was shaped from male perspective, making women nothing but products of male aesthetics without any consciousness.

A simple glimpse of that is caught from the female nudes prevailing in the history of art, most of which are about lust and were created to entertain the male, so the female characters in the paintings usually appear passive and touchable. For instance, *Liberty Leading the People* by the French romantic painter Eugène Delacroix shows a goodness with bare breasts holding a flag in hand as the symbol of the motivation of revolution (the prototype is Marianne who led French civilians in the July Revolution), around whom are male running or dead symbolizing power and the reality. If it is only the artist's preference for the image of Greek goddess of war in encouraging revolution among French civilians, then why is the character painted as half-naked? Apart from that, Peter Lely recorded in the *Venus and Cupid* the portrait of Nell Gwynne, a mistress of Charles the Second. It has been the subject of many controversial voices though as to the identity of the character in the painting, and some think it might not be Nell Gwynne, but whoever the woman is what is obvious is that she is flirting with the one watching her naked outside the painting. Instead of a voluntary expression, the painting actually shows passive submission to the owner of it and the owner of power, which agrees with the viewpoints of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre that “in spite of the awareness of being gazed at, the object has no choice but to find self-consciousness in others' eyes and thus she is no longer herself”.

3. Combination of Postmodernism and Feminism

Postmodernism, developed after the modernism though, coexists with the latter and is a comprehensive system combining the theories and practice in the late 20th century other than a philosophical, political or aesthetic wave. From the perspectives of confronting the spirit of enlightenment and the incredulity towards metanarratives, and of doubting the thoughts and values of modernism that enshrine progress and innovation, postmodernism is also understood as “anti-modernism” that sticks to rationalism and science, and values justice and freedom underpinning speculative science and technology (Barrett, 2017). Given the dominance of classic modernism by white men who upheld patriarchy and racism, postmodernism criticizes modernized historical issues that have been repressed for long, including female issues.

Postmodern feminism however got developed in such unprecedented environment and postmodern feminists made attempts to achieve female diversity, overturn gender inequality and destroy patriarchy by undermining and rejecting the application of essentialism, philosophy and universal truth. Influenced by Michel Foucault's pedigree analysis of power and subject, the traditional view about power was challenged as well as the opinion to regard women as the same, which laid a significant theoretic foundation for the development of postmodern feminism. From the perspectives of the production of disciplinary power outside politics and individual's way of living within the scope of micro-politics, Foucault's analysis revealed the overlap of patriarchy mechanism and feminism in the intimacy relationship. In addition, as for the relations between power, body and sex, Foucault put forward some useful concepts for feminist sociologists and politicians to facilitate their further analysis of the social structure of gender and sex, and their criticism about essentialism. Finally, Foucault took body as the major target of power, which was then employed by feminists to analyze the forms of control over women's bodies and minds in the contemporary society (Armstrong, 2005).

In the same period, Simone de Beauvoir proposed that “female is shaped and created to be female, not born to be” (De Beauvoir, 2014). Postmodern feminists made the argument that the concept of gender largely came from the discourses developed over time. Therefore, gender is not something natural or born with, but is built up by speeches given and images created by human, and the ways of self-presentation.

Feminist artists have been unhappy about the doctrine of “male supremacy” worshiped for long in the art system and art history. One of the modernism aesthetic beliefs is that high arts is in superiority to popular visual culture, however for feminist artists the difference between fine arts and handicrafts just lies in whether it comes from male's hand, as popular handicrafts in most cases are made by female. Therefore, female artists started to add “decoration” to their arts or adopt multi mediums to demonstrate and release their discontent and resistance.

4. Impact of Digital Media on the Reconstruction of Female Identity

4.1 Classic Medium

When the dominance of European arts by modernism came to an end in the 1960s, painting got replaced by photography, a preeminent postmodern form of art. Against the background of postmodernism prosperity, photography was no longer in the position as classic painting to subordinate to fine arts and be influenced by modern art theories, and thus bridged the gap between people and the society, and people themselves with images. As photography prevailing, visual culture got spread widely to convince the recipients and stimulate further criticism against the society. Postmodern photographers are unlike those traditional ones who shoot traditional scenes or objects, but focus more on expression, criticism, exposure of social issues or redefinition of inherent concepts from theoretical perspectives.

As a result, many female artists began to create works of art on topics about women. Digital arts as a new way of presenting postmodern arts restructured the concepts and technical achievements in multi research fields through digital medium to show the multi possibilities of female image presentation and advocate women's right to speak. One of the representative postmodernism artists Lorna Simpson, an American photographer and multimedia artist, took large black-and-white photographs of women attached with her words, all of which touched upon racial and gender topics. Simpson expressed through the models' postures her discontent with the mainstream society's oversight of the issues confronted by black women as individuals, and explored the diversity of female identities. Similarly, the American photographic self-portrait artist Cindy Sherman reinterpreted the images in popular media by dressing herself up as different kinds of women or even men, so as to challenge the authority of masculinity in the male-dominated society, show her recognition about gender and demonstrate the importance of vesting rights in female for a society.

4.2 Modern Medium

The description of female images in digital media, especially in fragmented media communication like advertisement, dramas and social media, cast an influential impact on recipients' awareness and consciousness. On the basis of creating new images, digital media is centered with appearance, leisure and consumerism in promulgating beliefs and disciplines, and there is no doubt that the recipients (or purchasers) will expect to build up new images with what they have paid for and be turned into stunners (Berger, 1990). Besides, women's dominance in social media could break the stereotypes and impact media and advertisement in a real sense, which is supported by a social media strategist called Soraya Fragueiro who made the point that women's growing engagement in social media is due to the emotional component to every action (including purchases) they take in social networks, which could explain the development of strategies by brands and shops targeting directly to female and the wide use of sensitive pictures, warm colors, straightforward but kind expressions, and catchy and delicate music or videos (ConnectAmericas, 2018). As a result, the once passive female is increasingly playing a more central and influential role than ever before.

On the one hand, Diana Damean expounded in her research on the perverse pattern which has not freed female from stereotype and put them in an equal position as male in work and family lives, but created "perfect female" and set a standard much harder to achieve and maintain. Specifically speaking, however successful a professional woman is, if she is not slim, not young, divorced, unmarried or without kids, she is not the one others will look up to. Therefore, for those who are independent, rational or successful, the pressure will be shifted on their personal lives (i.e., spouse, kid or attraction) to offset their achievements in careers (Damean, 2006).

On the other hand, the study of Hu Lianli and Liu Weina demonstrated the significance of the rapid development of digital media and its combination with postmodernism for realization of female rights, women's self-exploration and the construction of female identities based on their own standing and aesthetic standards. From their point of view, it is the media that draws public attention to female group, make women the center, promote products especially-designed for women, help them find the value of independence and impact the social awareness (Hu & Liu, 2005). Disseminated and promoted through media, the idea of gender equality has been gradually built up in public opinion. Further, media that promulgates female identity could positively impact the rule makers and the mainstream thoughts about gender, and thus accelerate the achievement of gender equality. According to John Berger, female audiences will subconsciously advocate or imitate the images that suit them. At the same time of imitation, they are liberated from patriarchy culture and start self-reconstruction based on their sense of self (Berger, 1990).

5. Conclusion

In the era of modernism, female is dominated by male without individual identity or consciousness, while the latter is the absolute owner of power, which was then overturned as postmodernism arising. Skeptical about the reality, postmodernism agrees with postmodern feminism and provides a safe harbor for feminist artists in their course of resistance against stereotype. Besides, as new forms of media coming into being, the pervasiveness and

inevitability of media communication contributed to the spread of changing images and finally the reconstruction of female identity. In the course of reconstruction, media inevitably fits in its retrospective about social gender and past women images, and as a result of the selective narrative and the gender implication, model and features structured by media the audiences will subconsciously put themselves in a position of re-creating self-image and challenging their idea about gender (Yu, 2013). In addition, media communication as the major form of cultural communication has provided materials for social reproduction and social changes, by which it achieved internal integrity as to how to present and re-shape female image, the potential of large-scale communication and demonstration of female self-consciousness in public cultural domain, and the social and public recognition of female as equal individuals. In such context, the female seems to have multi choices, but in a real sense has been fully restricted by the internalized and expectable standards of female. Therefore, regardless of the scope of media communication, the key is to get rid of all gender suppression and to vest female with freedom to construct their identities and cultures, and the rights to speak and participate in social lives.

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