Women of the Future: A Study of Women’s Images and Identities in Science Fiction Films in a Gender Studies Perspective

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Abstract

The mainstream ideology of society forms the realistic foundation for science fiction films to make plausible and imaginative predictions about the future of society. Along with the four stages of feminist ideological progress, namely the awakening, quest, liberation, and expansion periods, the social attributes, gender temperament, and identity types of female characters depicted in science fiction films have also undergone significant transformations. From the exploration of femininity through a dichotomous lens in the budding and growing period, to the bold advancements in women’s representation and identity during the flourishing period, and the reimagining of the essential attributes of organic human women during the discovery phase, this paper delves into the evolution of science fiction films. It selects classic films for analysis, situating gender issues within the timeline to project a plausible future direction for the portrayal of women in science fiction films.

Keywords

Science fiction film, feminism, gender binarism, embodiment, digital human

1. Introduction

With the advancement of science and technology and film production techniques, more science fiction films have gradually moved away from obscure content and patterned creations, instead have combined artistry with commercialism, which it is worth noting is the change of female characters in sci-fi films, including the change of narrative perspectives in which women participate, and the transformation of the image of female characters. The creation of science fiction films takes the anticipation of what human life will look like in the future as its most basic creative starting point. The ideological outcomes of the waves of feminism are the projection of reality when sci-fi films make reliable predictions of women’s identity in the future society.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and examine the developmental lineage and characteristics of female characters in sci-fi films, based on the ideological characteristics of feminist waves in different times. And to consider gender issues on the trajectory of time, from the aspects of the figurative characteristics of femininity, the independent personality of female characters, and the social identity genus of women. And make a reasonable analysis and extension of the future direction of the development of women’s roles in science fiction films.

2. The Feminist Awakening and the Absence of Female Subjectivity

2.1 The First Wave of Feminist Ideological Liberation

The first wave of the women’s liberation movement was born in the mid-nineteenth century and continued into the 1920s, characterizing an awakening of feminist ideology and a striving for fundamental rights and equality. However, its
2.2 Images of Women in the Budding and Growing Period of Science Fiction Cinema

In the sci-fi films of this period, masculinity and femininity follow the constraints of patriarchal centrumism, and the difference is obvious. Maria, the heroine of Metropolis (1927), has a dual nature. The daughter of the worker Maria is a representative of goodness and motherhood, appearing as a beautiful image of soothing the hearts of enslaved workers. The film unconsciously expresses society’s fantasies about the pure female savior, as well as the regulation of the status of a good woman, e.g., the comforting and healing role that women should play in society. On the contrary, the machine Maria is full of glamour and seduction, appearing on occasions characterized by sexual desire. Here, the film unconsciously demonstrates the habit of gazing at women as objects of latent desire. On either side of the dichotomy, the female figure does not have an independent personality to make choices on her own but is an "other" that is divorced from the body of discourse and follows the constraints under the influence of patriarchal centrism (Wang Yujue, 2018).

King Kong (1933) was a landmark work that broke through the limitations of early sci-fi films. It set a precedent for the image of the beast on the big screen of sci-fi films. The film's female character, Ann, who is delicate and feminine, is saved by King Kong, who is full of masculinity in the sense of gender binarism. The Lieutenant's line "It was beauty killed the beast.” points out the role of the female character as attracting the male characters (man or beast) through their beauty and weakness. But on the other hand, it also attributes the source of man's bad decisions to the temptation of women.

As Iris Marion Young said: “Social structures position individuals in relation of labor and production, power and subordination, desire and sexuality, prestige and status” (Iris Marion Young, 2005). Under the infiltration of patriarchal cultural discourse, women's roles in early cinema completely inherited the femininity of gender binarism, their main role in the narrative and aesthetics was to satisfy the habit of gazing at potential objects of the opposite sex, without influencing the autonomy of the narrative plot in the budding time of sci-fi films, which in fact reflected the lack of women's subjective status in the society at that time.

3. The Feminist Quest and the Elimination of the Gender Dichotomy

3.1 Feminist Explorations in Complete Personality

The second wave of feminism was born in the 1960s and lasted until the 1980s. During the Second World War, the number of women in employment increased dramatically. Through this process, women's sense of independence woke, and under the combined influence of higher education, the law, and the government, women have become more confident in their quest for liberation of freedom, equality, independence, and other dimensions of power, based on their quest for a complete personality.

The rapid development of communication media and science technologies in the 1950s provided rich creative materials for sci-fi films. The society under the influence of post-war trauma was full of tension about the international situation and human destiny. Under the shadow of the war and the carnival of technological development, the science fiction film ushered in a golden age.

3.2 The Shifting Image of Women in the Booming Period of Science Fiction Cinema

In the growth and prosperity of science fiction films in the early stage, female characters are either absent, such as 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea (1954) and 2001: A Space Odyssey (1968), or are presented on the screen to satisfy the mechanism of the operation of the gender power relations. In The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951), the female character Helen Benson serves as a softener to the human-alien conflicts, and assists the male protagonist with a gesture of admiration. As a mechanism for the operation of gender power relations, the gaze on women's gender temperament is once again solidified in the eyes of the general public (Laura Mulvey, 1975).

It was not until the character of Warrant Officer Ripley in Alien (1979) that the portrayal of women in science fiction
films changed dramatically. Ripley appears as the first protagonist, with physical characteristics that break the traditional binarism perspective of femininity. In the face of the fear of the unknown, she demonstrates great external and internal strength. More importantly, she possesses an independent personality based on practice and thought and makes the right decisions in a crisis that follows her independent personality. The film is dominated by a female character that drives the storyline throughout the plots. This imagery, which conforms to the traditional male "superhero", makes her the first female hero on screen (Wang Lin, 2014). This shift from the early more homogeneous image of women to the diversified image of women is a profound reflection of the change in social trends at that time. The successful portrayal of heroines catered to the feminist movement at its height.

In the period when feminist thinking has changed from a searching perspective to an emancipatory one, along with the high intelligence of science and technology, the difference between the two genders in terms of physical temperament in sci-fi films has been gradually reduced, which in turn has led to the gradual decline of the sharp contrast in gender temperament in the films (Yu Yingjie, 2016).

4. The Feminist Liberation and the Breakthrough Female Identity

4.1 The Redefinition of Feminism

The third wave of feminism, based on the development of democratic rights, took place in the 1980s and 1990s, defending individualism and diversity and attempting to redefine the meaning of feminism, focusing on issues that had previously been long neglected or belittled by society. It advocates breaking out of the original feminist frame of mind and calls for the elimination of social gender roles and prejudices, so as to break free from the constraints of ideology, theory, and practice, and to strive for equality and liberation in the true sense of the word.

4.2 The Breakthrough Female Identity in the Discovery Period of Science Fiction Cinema

The creation of sci-fi films hits its heyday by fostering a specific group of audiences and elevating the themes to a whole new level both ideologically and technologically. The image of women in sci-fi films has ushered in a brand-new identity, specifically manifesting itself as aliens, genetic hybrid organisms, and human-machine cyborgs. In the animated film Ghost in the Shell (1995), the female protagonist, Major Motoko Kusanagi, has her body replaced by a machine, making her a woman with a sense of human autonomy. Prosthetic limbs and bodies become extensions of her natural organs, breaking through the limitations of the original human material body to create an embodied physical identity (Liu Man-ting, 2023). Her superb leadership, intelligence, and combat prowess are all traditionally considered male traits, and women are gradually being othered by cybernetics.

The heroine of The Fifth Element (1997), Leeloo, was artificially created by scientists. She displays an infinitely powerful spirit when fighting her enemies. The other female character Diva, is an alien with a heavenly singing voice. Her overall physical form is feminine, but the unusual head structure and skin color reveal her alien identity. By mapping the deconstruction and reorganization of the female body, the alien characters who saved the universe show the common way of self-reconciliation when people are faced with the fear of the unknown.

Science fiction films under the influence of the feminist emancipatory wave have placed the issue of gender in a new space and time for consideration and extension by weakening the figurative characteristics of femininity in the binarism perspective of the characters, endowing them with independent personalities in line with their self-worth, and expanding the diversity of their social identity attributes. From the spoken other to the simulated other, the female character crosses the physical and material boundaries, as well as gender boundaries, and constructs a diversified subject that transcends race, age, and class.

5. The Feminist Expansion and the Emergence of Female Digital Human

5.1 The De-gendered Normativity in Everyday Life

Since the 21st century decade, the development of Internet technology has brought about great changes in the way of communication, which continued and further developed feminist thoughts. The expanded feminist representation in the political and economic spheres argues for the inclusion of a wider range of people's perspectives, emphasizing the fairness of our daily lives and calling for overcoming gender normalization by placing the traditional dichotomy of men and women under the same discourse.

The progress of network technology promoted a breakthrough transformation of the female characters’ identities in
sci-fi films. The traditional image of women has been dismantled with the emergence of purely digital human female figures, who are virtual subjects formed by data and information uploaded into the virtual storage space through communication and technology (Li Yan & Chang Bin, 2021). They are biological existences between the virtual and the real, without real organic bodies.

5.2 Digital Human Breaking the Boundaries of the Gender Binarism

The most iconic character is Samantha, the heroine of the film *Her* (2013), who is an avatar assembled from pure data to meet human needs, with only a voice and no material body. She engages in a full range of providing maximum empathy and emotional value. She can automatically adjust her gender temperament and discourse patterns based on big data when dealing with countless users, breaking down traditional gender norms and highlighting the non-identity and diversified qualities of women's identities (Li Zhaolong, 2023).

Since the new century, the development of science and technology has brought about a breakthrough in the limitations of the body and the fusion of physiological characteristics. In the constant exploration of newer images and deeper themes in sci-fi films, the female image is constructed in a gender-fused concept, which has also helped women better understand their own bodily functions and achievable social identity attributes, and the non-identity of women has begun to be realized.

6. Conclusion

Through the iterations, feminism has been elevated in its essence and social influence, and the image of women in sci-fi films as a cultural product has undergone a great transformation. Even in sci-fi films, the discourse of political rights is still deeply rooted, and each female figure in the films still faces gender political oppression and the confinement of the mainstream narrative in the process of being portrayed. On the whole, however, women's bodies and identities are being given more possibilities, making women's images more diversified and independent. The independence of women's roles in the plot function has been enhanced, and women's status has also progressed in the relationship between the genders.

Up to now, the images in film are not even limited to the traditional figurative image, and the development of genetic hybrids, mechanical bodies, and digital humans has brought about the extension of the breadth of sci-fi film creation, and the breakthrough of the solidified way of thinking. In the context of postmodern society, traditional gender norms and political ideologies are invalidated, and deconstructed, and new fusions are created, which enable gender scholars and film creators to realize that gender binarism has boundaries that need to be broken down.

The boundaries between male and female, organic and inorganic, are gradually being eliminated, gender blurs the boundaries, and corporeal existence loses the basis of division of inherent dichotomy. After the emergence of posthuman, the nature of women is re-defined, taking on a pluralistic yet ambiguous character. Just as the image of women often comes to mind when we mention “digital human”, science fiction films are not only inspired by the latest results of contemporary thought waves but also provide new perspectives and directions for the popularization and exploration of feminism so that we can look at gender from a new perspective and map the structure and reorganization of women's bodies in a new image for women of the future.

References


