



Reimagining the Female Body: Exploring Through the Contemporary Experimental Films in China

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Abstract: The exploration of the female body and ideology has been one of the most relevant trends in the past years. The Mongolian female has received little attention within the contemporary experimental films in China. This paper aims at establishing the link between reimagining the Mongolian female and contemporary experimental film in the context of the patriarchal social system of ethnic minorities. This work attempts to explore the significance of the female figure in experimental films on ethnic minority themes from a gender perspective and to bridge the gap in the study of minority subjects. The contribution of the present research involves how to employ experimental and surreal cinematic techniques to construct identities for Mongolian women and understanding of the reimagining of the Mongolian female in several ways and provides a basis for women studies in special ethnic groups.

Keywords: Mongolian female, experimental film, female identity, visual language

1. Introduction

This research aims to explore the significance of the female figure in experimental films on ethnic minority themes from a gender perspective and to bridge the gap in the study of minority subjects in video art by using experimental and surreal film visual language to construct the Mongolian female identity.

The film explores how experimental cinema portrays the female image, using Mongolian women as a case study to focus on the construction of the female image in films about ethnic minorities, exploring the aesthetic dilemmas of the film medium and ethnic minority women and integrating the female body as an ethnic symbol into experimental cinema's visual language. Firstly, to ascertain the development of minority-themed films and changes in the real-life environment of minority women. By inviting minority female film audiences to join an in-depth survey, theories such as anthropology, ethnographic film theory and gender studies are used to dissect the ideology and creation of the image of women in minority-themed films. Secondly, to explore film language that conveys identity while female viewers quickly build their perceptions of women in cinema through these 'symbols', breaking down the presence of Mongolian women as models of communal behaviour. It investigates the correspondence and non-correspondence between ethnographic cinema and gender studies and how they can complement and interpret each other. It is an attempt to transform the monolithic nature of traditional scholarship and the restrictive nature of particular ethnic surnames in the construction of female images and to make anthropological studies more intuitive and open to deeper understandings.

2. Experimental films' female themes

Female experimental film art refers to video works dominated by female creators' expression using symbolic visual language and non-traditional narrative structures. Feminists contend that image reproduction is still a political issue. Godard's (1980) use of female imagery challenges those who subscribe to feminist arguments by exposing in his work how women are exploited in the transformation of images in a consumer society, creating an experience of the image that equates women with the relationship of 'sex'; this allows Godard to respond to how consumer society shapes a woman's image and makes it conform to the established notion of femininity and female attractiveness (MacCabe, Eaton, Mulvey and Godard, 1980). Laura Mulvey's (1975) 'male gaze' exposes and critiques male-centrism in mainstream cinema, liberating the female figure from the dilemmas of visual passivity and plot. According to feminist film theory, women in films are depicted in four ways: they are (a) typified, (b) symbols, (c) lacking and (d) socially constructed. As a representational narrative language, the deprivation of the female figure in mainstream cinema's audiovisual language is a direct reflection of ideological constraints. Through a deconstructive critique of the audiovisual language of traditional cinema models, women's experimental cinema exposes the deep-seated anti-female nature of its ideology.

Many female artists have been inspired to use the self or other female bodies as the subject of expression through themes such as the female body, colonisation, gender policy, instrumentalisation of power and gender consciousness. The female figure is often 'objectified' by men in traditional aesthetic conceptions of the artistic presentation of women and constructed as an object of consumption under the male gaze, where the subject narrative becomes the object to be viewed. Nevertheless, female artists' self-expression has led to a gradual shift in male artists' positioning of the female figure, with a more exploratory view of women. Moreover, in making video art, female artists film and record the whole performance art process to achieve artistic dissemination. Through video installations, these female artists demonstrate self-consciousness and self-desire, breaking the bonds of a solidified aesthetic and a patriarchal society's discourse.

3. Experimental films' expression of female images

Feminist experimental film criticism is a fierce critique of traditional narrative cinema ideologies, establishing a subversion of traditional male discourses, pioneering 'anti-cinema' experiments expose and deconstructing the myths of male cinema with a 'destructive retelling', most notably of the female point of view.

Simone de Beauvoir (n.d.) proposes the cultural construction of women as the 'other', with women representing 'womanhood' and 'otherness' to men and men perceive that 'women cannot escape the structural "otherness" of women in a patriarchal society'. In patriarchal societies, women are the property of their fathers and, when attached to their husbands' families, are only considered chattel of their husbands and remain under male guardianship throughout their lives. Women in a patriarchal society tend to see the world through the eyes of men and adopt male standards as their own.

Scholars of feminist film criticism using semiotic, psychoanalytic and ideological cultural theories, such as Clare Johnston, Laura Mulvey, Haskell and Teresa de Lauretis, have criticised mainstream cinema. They argue that it creates solidified images of women from a male perspective through characteristic rhetorical devices and forms of entertainment, making women objects of consumption, while the deeper essence of their ideology is anti-feminine, a phenomenon that is more pronounced in minorityist imagery.

As a vehicle, experimental video cinema differs from previous ideological representations of traditional ethnic films that highlight national heroes, investigate historical themes and examine the impact of modern civilisation on ethnic culture. Experimental film and video art more intuitively reflect women's visual perceptual experiences and psychological aspirations. The experimental form of expression reinforces the idea of 'human liberation', providing a perspective that questions the conventional and cemented portrayals of national heroism in the Mongolian female image. The experimental film falls midway between fiction and documentary, and the symbolic nature of the Mongolian woman as an ethnic minority allows for a renewed focus on this female figure and the establishment of a concrete perception from the symbolic to the real individual. In its expression, the surreal language of the camera is a criticism of traditional ethnic imagery and heroic nationalism.

In *An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film*, Deren (1946), a pioneer of experimental American cinema, explained her approach to filmmaking; she emphasised that filmmaking is a matrix in which elements exist outside the constraints of hierarchy, order or value. Her 1943 short film, *Meshes of the Afternoon*, hints at the possibility of fantasy and even illusion and foreshadows her experiments in the film that overlap and juxtapose diametrically unrelated spaces, and represents the most prominent themes of her work: dreams, reflection, rhythm, vision, ritual and identity.

A key, a knife and other iconic objects appear throughout the film. Deren said that she wanted the film to allow a human being to experience an incident, rather than record its specific details. Deren's multiple roles as a woman are reflected in this film, aside from being a film director, exploring and advancing the narrative structure, she is also an independent individual, expressing herself and her thoughts about various aspects such as sexual relations as a female artist.

4. Women's aesthetic dilemma in traditional Mongolian films

Despite what appears to be an aesthetic binary in her oeuvre, Ottinger's Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia allays any putative schism between fetishism and 'documentary-like' observance in her creation of an alternative space within Asia (Decadent Fetishism in Ulrike Ottinger's Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia, 2022). As a nomadic minority group, Mongolian women have a more complex identity. Based on the creator's view of Mongolian social life in a different era, women in traditional Mongolian cinema have long existed as symbols of cultural motifs and solidified images with nationalistic themes, leading to the presentation of an aesthetic distortion of the female image.

Women made feminist films in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the modern Western women's movement, expressing feminist discourse, condemning patriarchal oppression and examining women's lives. The aims were to use the documentary and visual nature of film as a propaganda medium and to subvert the patriarchal hegemony of the cinematic art tradition and move women from a position of dependence and domination to one of mastery. These non-documentary forms of art,



Figure 1. *Meshes of the Afternoon*, 1943

(Directors: Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid; Writer: Maya Deren; Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0036154/>)



Figure 2. *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, 1989

(Director: Ulrike Ottinger; Writer: Ulrike Ottinger; Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0095406/>)

known as 'women's cinema', are films that criticise gender oppression and expose the hypocrisy of women's objectification in traditional cinema, while seeking to create a female cinematic language that speaks to femininity. Such films are not simply a confrontation between men and women, but a departure from the male model of reference, allowing women to become truly independent and autonomous individuals, shaping the lives of new women.

Within the train, the sequestered women, another typical feature of Ottinger's films, explore, perform and transform their female–female desires. However, performance is not limited to the professionals such as Katz, Ziegfeld and the Kalinkas. While all the figures end the film rejoicing in the dining car, the characters themselves, as Longfellow and Grisham note, are performances of stereotypical travellers. The performative nature of all these scenes is crucial to understand the cinematographic split between the venues and the film's putative transition to a more ethnographic aesthetic in the second part (Decadent Fetishism in Ulrike Ottinger's *Johanna d'Arc of Mongolia*, 2022). German director Ulrike Ottinger is the first European director to be granted permission to film in Inner Mongolia, China, where she has made several films. *Johanna D'Arc of Mongolia's* different narrative modes, spaces and characters illustrate how Ottinger's films combine documentary and fantasy, suggesting multilingualism and multiculturalism. Ottinger chose to use still shots to express a timeless, cyclical view of time on the Mongolian steppe through the journey of five women with different identities, and an oriental view of time through the rituals, games, labour and migration of everyday life. The East is based on an agrarian civilisation where the perception of time relies on the cycles of nature, such as the transition from day to night and the changing of the seasons. It is a cyclical, ambiguous concept of time. A decadence and extreme aestheticism take place in the context of Western modernism. This depicted Western landscape contrasts sharply with the pure, natural Mongolian steppe outside the carriage. These two threads also represent East and West's different views of time. The concept of modernity can only be conceived within the framework of a specific sense of time, a linear irreversible and unstoppable historical sense of time passing.

5. Conclusion

This study intends to figure out how to employ experimental and surreal cinematic techniques to construct identities for Mongolian women. It contributes to the understanding of reimagining of the Mongolian female in several ways and provides a basis for women studies in special ethnic groups. This would be a fruitful area for further work.

This research is exploratory. With only a few studies systematically investigated, the impact of the experimental film for women research on ethnic minority women is insufficient, especially for women's ideology research and the development of the female image. To date, studies that have examined the association between special population studies and gender studies are limited.

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