

The Poetic Fables and Realistic Dilemmas of Disney's Live action Film "Mulan"

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Abstract

This article takes the 2020 Disney live action film "Mulan" as a case study to analyze the exploration of women in Niki Caro's works. On the one hand, this film uses unique visual symbols and emotional expressions to compose a poetic fable about women's awakening. On the other hand, it is difficult to break free from the "male standard" in the text and the "compromiseism" in business. With the help of this chain from various angles, one can glimpse the contradictory situation of female film creation at present.

Keywords

"Mulan", Feminism, Women's Dilemma, Disney Movies.

1. Introduction

"Mulan" is a live action film produced by Walt Disney Pictures, directed by Niki Caro, and starring Liu Yifei. Compared with Disney's huge investment, "Mulan" suffered from "not acclimatized" in Chinese Mainland, with only 278 million RMB at the box office, far less than the publicity expected. As a result, there has been widespread debate over the non nationalized cultural differences and misalignment in the images, leading to a decline in the reputation of "Mulan". According to Douban's rating, as of 2024, The Douban rating for the film "Mulan" is 4.9, far below the average score of Disney produced movies.

However, numerous discussions have rarely touched upon "Mulan" as the main expression of a female film. "Female films are a collection of images guided by female gaze and texts written by female thoughts, creating a film text and meaning that belongs to women themselves." [1] "Mulan" is precisely a female perspective that expresses Mulan's confusion, contradiction, frustration, and hope. The collaboration between Liu Yifei and Niki Caro is more like a "female appearance" in the intertextual relationship between China and the West, North Korea and modernity, poetry and film. This article believes that in the context of commercial operation, the director uses a unique female perspective, extensively showcases female consciousness fables, and interweaves the expression of female consciousness in the compromise of commercialization

2. A Poetic Fable of Women's Awakening

2.1. Identity: Daughter, Woman, and Warrior

"Due to biological differences, women are not only defined as others, but also as mothers in the process of human reproduction, and are attached with cultural identity expectations in the process of civilization development." [2] In the feudal social context of China where the film is located, Mulan, as a daughter, carries her parents' expectation of becoming a mother. The traditional concept of "male superiority and female inferiority" makes it difficult for women to cultivate "vitality"; The pressure from marriage puts Mulan in a dilemma of self confrontation with family affection; In the eyes of matchmakers, the various standards of being a "virtuous

wife" are also like a kind of personality shackles. Correspondingly, diet, powder mixing, and tea art have become things that women can do to prepare for becoming a "mother".

If the identity of "daughter" is a shackle imposed on women from a moral and cultural perspective, then "woman" is a "legal" bias towards women constructed from a social system. The military camp has implemented strict punishment measures to prohibit women from entering. Mulan, who left her family, broke away from her daughter's identity and became a woman, but could not shake off prejudices from society. The identity of a "warrior" symbolizes social recognition, and in the film, Mulan has obtained this identity twice: first, Mulan Hua, who disguised herself as a man; The second is Mulan as a female. In the first attempt, Mulan won this title as a male in the military camp, and only in the second attempt did she truly obtain this title as a female. In the transformation of her identity from a daughter to a woman, and then to a warrior, Mulan gradually transformed from a socially regulated figure to a socially recognized figure, realizing the self-worth of women.

2.2. The "Five Section Fable" of Phoenix and Women's Awakening

The phoenix is a lucky bird in ancient Chinese legends. In the pre-Qin period, the male was called "Feng"(male phoenix) and the female was called "Huang"(female phoenix), collectively known as the Phoenix(Feng Huang). However, since the Qin Dynasty, emperors have used "dragon" as their symbol, and imperial concubines have gradually used "Phoenix" as their symbol. So, the meaning of "phoenix" in Chinese culture leans towards women. Semiotics believes that "meaning must be expressed through symbols, and the purpose of symbols is to express meaning. Conversely, there is no need to express meaning without symbols, and there are no symbols that do not express meaning." [3] Based on this, this article believes that the phoenix also has symbolic meaning in the film, and its five appearances constitute a "five section" fable of women's awakening.

The first appearance of the phoenix was during Mulan's journey to replace her father in the army. At this time, the phoenix corresponds to Mulan's first step in finding herself, symbolizing awakening; The second time it appeared after Mulan was defeated by a witch, the phoenix at this time corresponded to Mulan's female identity, symbolizing innocence; the third time, after Mulan refused the invitation from the witch, the appearance of the Phoenix was a recognition of Mulan's unwavering qualities of loyalty, bravery, and authenticity, symbolizing nirvana; The fourth time was when Mulan rescued the emperor, and the phoenix at this time corresponded to Mulan's victory, symbolizing recognition; The fifth time was after Mulan returned home from the end of the war, and the phoenix at this time corresponded to the completeness of the family, symbolizing success. If feminism, as an expression, seeks to seek the subjectivity and liberation of women in dealing with the balance of male and female power, then this is the director's allegorical interpretation using the symbol of the phoenix in the film.

2.3. The Color Expression of Gender Aesthetics

"Film color is a dynamic color that not only integrates the representation of characters, but also the extension and objectification of their inner emotional world." [4] Hollywood excels in using color to express characters' emotions, and under the guidance of Niki Caro, color is not only a representation of characters' emotions, but also a color metaphor with gender awareness. In ancient China, masculine beauty and feminine beauty were respectively referred to as masculine beauty and feminine beauty. In the film, Tulou, Roen Camp, and the palace all used hard light, dark tones, and high contrast colors to render a masculine beauty. However, Mulan, as the protagonist, was shrouded in a highly masculine tone, and the symbol of female self was also submerged. But, in the scenes of Mulan being alone, bathing in the river, and bidding farewell to Chen Honghui, white, blue, and blue red are used as the main colors, creating a scene color with soft light, bright tones, and low contrast, with the first two being color metaphors for women in their own space, while the last scene creates a female color tendency when men

appear. With the help of color expression, the director metaphorically expresses the symbol of women's awakening from being trapped to breaking through.

3. The Realistic Dilemma of Female Expression

3.1. Text dilemma

As a way of expressing language, text not only constitutes the meaning of the text itself, but also constitutes the symbolic order containing the relationship between men and women in the text. Due to social and cultural reasons, masculine writing occupies an absolute dominant position over feminine writing, and masculine writing is built in a binary opposition centered around males. Or, in other words, masculine writing is based on the symbolic order of masculinity, which is why women are used as symbols of consumption. The task of feminist films is to break this symbolic order and explore a way out for female subjects. Therefore, the text that carries male/female films is particularly crucial.

The story prototype of Mulan comes from the folk song "Mulan Poetry" during the Northern and Southern Dynasties in China. As a folk story, we cannot verify whether the character "Mulan" existed in history, but she has been passed down as a "female hero" to this day. From the perspective of the story, Mulan represents the voice of women in ancient China, achieving a transcendence of her own gender norms; From a social perspective, the cultural symbol of "Mulan" reflects the value standards set by feudal society for women, which is the "male standard". In feudal society, norms were established for women from multiple perspectives such as ethics, legal systems, and social agreements, making them subservient to the male dominated system. The success of Mulan's character is based on her masculine perspective, and the social recognition she has gained is judged by male standards, which also represents the maximum tolerance of feudal society for women to break through gender norms. Therefore, the Disney live action adaptation of "Mulan" by Niki Caro, although heavily incorporating elements of American film characteristics and female consciousness into the story, still cannot break through the inherent textual limitations, otherwise "Mulan" would not be Mulan. At the same time, as the sum of the parts that make up the whole, details also highlight the differences and narrative difficulties between men and women. For example, the portrayal of the differences between men and women in the military camp, the views of Mulan and her comrades on "getting married", and the different drinking habits not only highlight the differences between men and women, but also make Mulan fall into the discourse system of a patriarchal society. In addition, in the character portrayal of Mulan and her comrades, the male character is intentionally biased and belittled to contrast the positive image of the female protagonist. This approach often leads to inappropriate identification of male female relationships, which is also one of the difficulties in feminist expression.

3.2. Business dilemmas

In the context of globalization, commercial logic has gradually become the dominant force in the film market. "Investment, return, market, and box office have become new keywords for the success of film operations, and personal discourse often requires sacrifices for market demand." [5] Therefore, gender films inevitably deviate from the current film production philosophy that focuses on visual wonders and entertainment pleasure. In order to cater to the market, many directors labeled as "feminist" have begun to hold back and compromise, and the personality of female films is gradually weakening. From a broader perspective, it is also one of the practical difficulties of feminist expression.

Niki Caro once became a prominent representative of female film directors with a series of films such as "Memory Desire" and "Whale Rider", but now the visual expression of "Mulan" is more like "on-demand customization" under commercial logic. From a production perspective,

Hollywood's professional level of production, color scheme, and art setting are impeccable; In terms of the celebrity lineup, the successive hype of big name celebrities such as Liu Yifei, Donnie Yen, and Jet Li has captured the audience's appetite; In terms of film promotion, the combination of Disney Princess and traditional Chinese stories has brought high expectations to the audience. The commercial operation mode is certainly easier to solve the investment problem of film production, but the constraints on the expression of female film subjects are even more obvious. Female film pioneer Laura Mulvey believes that "However self-conscious and ironic Hollywood managed to be, it always restricted itself to a formal mise-en-scène reflecting the dominant ideological concept of the cinema." [6] She attempts to destroy the so-called "Hollywood discourse system," but Mulan is trapped within it.

4. Conclusion

The demands expressed by women and the difficulties encountered in reality are not only intertwined in Niki Caro's film "Mulan", but also widely present in women's films under the contemporary market discourse system. By analyzing the text of "Mulan", we can explore a path with certain reference significance for the expression of gender awareness in feminist films. At present, feminism has gone through three large-scale development waves worldwide, and "women's power" has gradually become a consensus. However, through observation, we can still see that although feminist films have gained more and more attention and recognition on one hand, they have also shown a weak state of being deeply trapped on the other hand. From the film Mulan, it can be seen that directors can not only create successful women's films, but also skillfully manage commercial films. Can filmmakers now follow this path and explore a combination of market rules and female expression? Or are there irreconcilable contradictions between the two? I have great confidence in this and look forward to it.

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