Female Characters in the Gangster Films of Martin Scorsese

Zitong Lin

Sichuan Conservatory of Music, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

angela@cas-harbour.org

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Abstract. Martin Scorsese is one of the most famous American directors and his films reveal a real aspect of American society. Martin Scorsese's unique artistic vision and thinking made an unparalleled contribution to the gangster films of American cinema. Scorsese's gangster movies are closely connected with reality, and the characters' image in the narrative is also close to real life. Scorsese's cinematic world is a microcosm of the rise and fall of the American gangsters within decades. From time to time, Scorsese's narrative of female characters was also influenced by changes in moral thoughts. This paper attempts to interpret the female images in gangster movies from the perspective of sociocultural structure and film studies. The results obtained in the analysis include the importance of shaping a woman character and the future trend of gangster movies.

1. Introduction

American film is located at the center of the world's film industry. The gangster film is a subgenre of crime film and focuses on gangsters and organized crime. There are a variety of distinctive gangster movies influenced by different cultures, such as the "Italian gangster movie" in the United States and the "Cops and robbers film" in Hong Kong. The gangster movie depicts not only the bloody violence of the gang community but also the living conditions and mental state of the marginalized people. The female characters in gangster movies have dynamic connections with social changes. Therefore, they represent a specific cultural context that cannot be ignored in film narrative. The limitations and breakthroughs of female consciousness have also changed the narrative form of gangster movies. It is undoubtedly a popular means to analyze the changes in social aesthetics and trends of thought through interpreting the female image. This article contains four theoretical parts: male visual narrative constructs female characters, female living space and their role, female roles' rebellious consciousness and general conclusions. First, the gangster film melts the female vision into the male vision during the narrative process, forming a vague perspective of the narrative, transforming the female character from looking for self to a passive object satisfying male desire. Secondly, in order to satisfy the audience and the market, it is necessary to follow a similar narrative way to depict female characters, constantly constructing the same female moral predicament and weakening female power. The most interesting turning point in Scorsese's gangster movies is the impact of personal life and social changes and striving to portray the fate and encounter of women's self, as well as the image of psychological characteristics that form a complete sense of modern women.

2. Male visual narrative constructs female characters

In the twentieth century, many films in the United States put parents and family at the core of the story, and Scorsese's gangster movies are no exception. He was influenced by his own Italian immigrant family and built the stability and authority with the patriarchal family as the core of his movies. In the book named Introduction to Films Studies (2013), the author pointed out that the ideological basis of traditional Hollywood narrative comes from the inheritance of the literary tradition of realism[1]. Many feminist researchers in the later generation believe that this inheritance maintains a fixed pattern of viewing and understanding. It belongs to the patriarchal society that occupies the center of domination. According to Scorsese's own statement, his film knowledge comes from his huge amount of filming, and films before the 1960s that did not have important accomplishments in feminism. Under the influence of the long-term ideology "Hegemony", the ingrained ideas are

unconsciously controlled. It is not difficult to understand that Scorsese is affected by some fixed thinking habits, and it is difficult to break the rule and shape a unique female character.

By interpreting the cultural contexts of gangster movies, we can notice that female characters are mostly regarded as male appendages. Men in the gangs control money and power, and even if they sometimes came from a lower social class, they still can have a place in society through violence and other means. In contrast, female characters are "ignored" and "exiled" in gangster movies. They are not concerned about in the gangster movies dominated by male characters, and only have a few words in the line. In the patriarchal gangster movies, whether it is weak or strong, women cannot escape the destiny-like tragic ending, except relying on men to survive. This shows the dominance of men in gangster movies, and women appear as objects of materialized money and visual beauty.

Laura Mulvey proposed in 1975 that the pleasure of watching is divided into male-oriented peeping, and female as a peeped object. It is not only to prove that the female character being peeped in the film is often a passive narrative, but it is depicted in the subjective perspective of the male, and "seeing itself is a pleasure"[2]. The male controls the overall vision of the film, and the visual mode of erotic order is constantly formed, which causes women to be confined to similar image construction. "Let it be controlled by curious eyes." As in the Casino (1995), when Sam first stared at Kim Jelly, he was in the monitor of the casino, and Sam was curious about Ginger and was happy about this gaze, and then hinted at Sam in the relationship between the two. Ginger also felt the desire to control. With respect to the psychoanalytic perspective, Freud and Mulvey's theory emphasizes that men control the "viewing" in the movie, and women are only being directed when the peek is prohibitive and pornographic. The desire is based on men. The cinema provides the audience with a perfect place for "sneak peek" because it provides a dark and closed environment that makes gaze easier. Mulvey also mentioned that the gaze in the movie is tied to the male. This is because the male is the core of the movie, the hero, and the female is regarded as the secondary, the recipient of the gaze. Women are still being beaten in the consciousness of men and become a symbol of the display. In the movie, the audience repeatedly followed Sam's gaze to observe Ginger's social laughter in the crowd. Sam enjoyed the movement of Ginger, and Ginger became more charming and meaningful in this type of narrative. At the same time, the use of money on costumes and other materialized female characters implies that women cannot pose a threat to the "watched" eyes.

"Women are both seen and displayed, and their appearance is coded to achieve a strong visual and sexy effect." Charlie's peeping in Mean Streets (1973) is very explicit. At the beginning of the film, Charlie carefully started at the bar dancers and his lover, Theresa. He peered through the blinds and magnified the partial close-up of the body in the screen, which was the subjective viewing behavior of the male subject. The female characters peeped by males in the film are full of charm and sexual attraction, showing the function of venting pleasure. The silent women forcibly undertake the inner monologue of the male characters and lack of right to speak. Charlie suffered from his inner belief and the fire of hell, and regarded lust as the greatest enemy. The two female characters who appeared next to Charlie were unconsciously classified as threats and "charged". Male roles have the power to control women characters. Their inflated crimes of sexual desire weaken the other possibilities of the female roles.

3. The living space and role function

As an Italian-born filmmaker, Scorsese's filmic world offers a realistic critique from the perspective of historical tradition to the audience by creating gangster movies that are close to reality. Most of these films are dominated by American-American characters. In the Italian gangster family, people value their blood relatives very much. The family is irreplaceable in their hearts and has an exceptional meaning. In general, men are the absolute leader, and women are the accessories of husbands and sons. They are completely materialized and mainly bear the role of succession and service. Men even possess a dominant position in marriages. Men can have an affair with others away from home, but women must keep their families, children, and a vanishing marriage without equal respect and power. They are also unable to share resources with men on an equal footing so that they must be protected and gain financial support from masculine men. Gradually, females are used to the

deprivation of power and the loss of voice. For instance, a particular scene appeared twice in Goodfellas (1990). Once Karen's material needs were met, she immediately gave Henry a blow job. The same thing happened to Henry's lover, who also showed obedience when Henry complained about her complaints. Such pornographic spectacles frequently appear in the movie, which is the inertia of the male narrator's thinking places women in a living space of a solidified mode. Conversely, "black movies consolidate the patriarchal family model of male dominance by destroying women who pose a threat to the established order"[3]. In Casino (1995), Ginger's material needs were always being questioned and controlled. She showed a rebellious attitude, so her "boyfriend" made her psychological suffering. Ginger's image as a "snake-beauty" makes the male character fall in love with her, constantly challenging the stability of the patriarchal order, such as derailing in marriage, damaging male property, and escaping from the family many times. By abandoning the status of a mother, the film eventually ends Ginger's life to weaken her destructive power.

The female characters have placed themselves in a dominated position and have been subjected to the psychological control of the patriarchal social thoughts for a long time. Thus, they are unable to conduct self-examination mental activities. It is also difficult for them to establish independent thinking and free thought to achieve self-survival and higher value. Women can also serve as a bond for men to maintain their lives. When men return home or to women after fighting and killing outside, there is always a moment of warmth and a slower rhythm in the movie narrative. Nevertheless, this weakens the social status of women and makes them sacrifice their spirit of marriage in reality. As in Goodfellas (1990), after Karen got married to Henry, she often needed to attend the gathering of gangsters' wives, and the wives were utilized as useful tools for husbands to maintain family socialization and a symbol of family happiness.

Besides, the weak position exhibited by women is likely to raise males' desire to protect them. When such emotions are triggered, men will gain a great sense of responsibility and accomplishment in their behaviors and establish a personal image in the film. "She is not so much a person as she is the love and fear that she inspired in the male protagonist, or the male protagonist's concern for her, but it is what she did with the male protagonist. The heroine itself does not have the slightest importance"[4]. Mulvey analyzed Gangs of New York (2002) psychologically. When Jenny Everdeane was put in danger of violence by Bill, she cast a helpless look at Vallon under the stage and immediately evoked Vallon's revenge. From the perspective of role modeling, the emotions expressed by Vallon shape the image of a hero, and Jenny is merely a less important bearer, completely losing the existence of self-consciousness, but only the violence and gaze of male characters push the show. Nonetheless, Jenny also played the dual role of "the violent" and "leader", and in the meanwhile, she served as an indispensable part of promoting conflicts too.

4. The rebellious consciousness of female characters

4.1 The characters in the 1960s

Feminism rose in the United States in the 1960s, but it was still rare for female filmmakers to obtain an important position in the industry and achieve business success. In the book named Scorsese on Scorsese (2005), the filmmaker told an unforgettable story, "A major breakthrough in Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore (1974) is the introduction of women to the staff to make the film as realistic as possible"[5]. However, what women's changes in the film industry can bring to women in the film is very subtle and difficult to assert. In the world of gangster movies, whether it is a woman who exists as a negative face or a woman who is vaguely obscured, they have an indelible patriarchal color and represent the product of the social law of unequal gender consciousness. French feminist Beauvoir pointed out in The Second Sex (1998) that "women are not born, but are acquired, and traditional customs and the needs of a patriarchal society have created women"[6]. The situation has changed now, the feminist movement has continually grown since the beginning of the twenty-first century, and even the gangster movies at the hegemonic center cannot ignore the energy of women. Women began to think more about their status and value. The single female role in the male perspective is no

longer depicted. Filmmakers began to pursue more independent female characters in artistic creation. Feminist films and gay movies gradually occupied lists of the most popular movies in recent years. The popularity of the 2017 Oscar-nominated films, Three Billboards (2017), Lady Bird (2017), and The Post (2017), is enough to reflect the turmoil of social thoughts as a mirror.

4.2 The character in the 1990s

In the 1990s, more women in Europe and the United States became directors, photographers, screenwriters, lighting engineers, and editors. Women broke into the mainstream movie industry at the same time. For example, Thelma&Louise (1991) and Bandits (1997) are the movies of much debate as rebellious feminist films during the 1990s. The textual story from the female perspective was gradually accepted by audiences and occupied a certain position in the mainstream cinema. Earlier, Martin's perception of the power of the female role as a narrative controller also showed a dynamic change and sought a breakthrough. Scorsese said that Henry's life history in Goodfellas (1990) is invisible in the 1950s and 1960s of the underworld, which led to the disillusionment and corruption of the 1970s. While women's performance in the face of the weakening of patriarchy was portrayed, Karen was tortured because of her betraying behavior in marriage, so she chose to pick up the "gun" (symbolic symbol of male reproduction) and pointed to Henry. Karen intended to recover the broken love through violence (initiative). In the Phallocentrism of Sigmund Freud, the phallus is a symbol of power and men. When this symbol is in the hands of women, women are no longer disabled, and they become complete and as dangerous as a bomb. Even though the rebellion in Goodfellas (1990) failed, Scorsese's subtle changes in articulating women's power cannot be ignored.

4.3 The character after 2000

In the twenty-first century, the status of female characters in Scorsese's gangster movies also significantly improved. The relationship between male and female characters is no longer following the same mode of association and plot. "Women are strong and independent. They are not good wives and mothers. They are actually companions that help men to achieve the (old) self-destruction, (new) self-growth, and ultimately self-rescue partners." For example, Jenny in the Gangs of New York (2002) and Madeleine in The Departed (2006) began to understand the dual independence of their career and life. Additionally, they were authorized to speak and choose by the director. Instead of staying at home and dealing with family matters, they grew up with male characters and provided essential assistance to the men. In the case of the male characters violate the female characters' power and safety, their resistance can be violent too.

In Gangs of New York (2002), even though Jenny explored her own path by relying on her attachment to the largest gangs, she has the spirit of existential feminism. When the dance was held, she was even given the "power" of the superior and became the "Queen". She chose a male partner at the ball. It is extremely special as an anti-traditional behavior. On the other hand, she has a very open mind of sexual freedom. Vallon accepted Jenny's new self after changing mind on the unacceptable old male right. This is the first time in the gangster movies of Martin Scorsese that the male and female protagonists have interactions and rebelled against the patriarchal society.

5. Conclusion

Scorsese's gangster movies help us better understand gender issues and women's cultural contexts in American society since the 1970s. In addition, by analyzing Scorsese's films, we are able to comprehend the appeals of female characters and the role of film narratives in different periods. The early gangster films emphasized the development of women characters' sexual compliance and fixed images. In these movies, women characters are entitled to a unique meaning and consciousness through the "peek" perspective. When female characters threaten male characters by destroying traditional order, they are severely punished. On the other hand, female characters in later gangster films gradually paid more attention to independence. They rejected traditional standards of family ethics and the fate ending of female characters, leaving an impressive and powerful female image. Moreover, the female characters also share equal rights with men and build a bright future together. In

today's film industry, shaping a good female image is an important point in gangster movies. For example, in Bound (1996) and Kill Bill (2003,2004), the female characters' image showed the transcendence of passive object and subordinate status. These feminist gangster movies indicate that the trend of future gangster movies needs to regard gender equality as the main issue.

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