

# Deconstructive Weapons Against the Male Gaze: Writing and Showing of the Female Body

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## ABSTRACT

Through the brief introduction of female roles in independent films and the discussion of Cindy Sherman's photographic works, this paper, by means of H el ene Cixous's theoretical text and the relevant discussion of the uncertainty of postmodernism, explores the deconstruction thought behind the writing and display of the female body, the weapon of anti-male gaze.

**Keywords:** *Postmodernism, Feminism, Male Gaze, Independent films, H el ene Cixous, Indeterminacy*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of the independent film industry has contributed to the improvement of women's status. The independent films help with the spread of postmodern feminism, as appeared in Cindy Sherman's work, though she refused to say so. Her works are representatives of postmodern art with deconstruction, destruction and subversion of traditional texts. The second feminist movement in France mentions the goal of women's writing, that is, to break down barriers, hierarchies, rhetoric, and rules. Cindy Sherman's photographic works and the theory of H el ene Cixous are about the theoretical weapon of anti-Phallogocentrism and anti-male gaze. The theories of deconstruction and uncertainty are important in independent films and photoshoots, which promote women's body display and writing. The anti-male gaze is a deconstruction of the linguistic system of Phallogocentrism.

## 2. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AMERICAN INDEPENDENT CINEMA AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

The independent films stand on the truth side, which also relates to social conversation [1]. The results in American independent films reflect the social reality, unlike Hollywood's happy ending [1]. Independent filmmakers think that any happy ending was wrong at that time because it is far away from real life. After

WW2, people do not want to experience the cruelty that the war brought again, and they wanted to pursue a happy life. It is no doubt that Hollywood has reflected people's willingness, which does not mean that the "tragedy" would not happen again [1]. However, most independent film producers contributed to telling more generous promises to the audience. In particular, a younger film producer said that the audience would listen and respond if the film is honest and real.

The improvement of women status has relationships with the independent film industry because female workers communicate how to pursue feminist content in mainstream channels [2]. Furthermore, for postmodern films, various famous women work as independent filmmakers, including American "independent" matches' creators, who exist beyond male domination, and they are also separate. Therefore, independent areas are understood as a space that women are easier to enter. The audience has supported this idea by participating in the statistic of women creating and filmmaking [2]. In particular, Martha Lauzen works in the Centre for the Study of Women in Film and TV, and she said that female directors accounted for 32%. Although male directors still accounted for double of female directors, they are allowed to try to film their works [2].

The independent films have discussed some attractive methods to use normal space related to a female's family [2]. For instance, Lisa Cholodenko's film "Olive Kitteridge" was specially broadcasted on

HBO, and Jodi Brooks is a filmmaker who thinks that Lisa Cholodenko's film is an outsider in women-centred films because the film almost radically limits women's activities [2]. The film has been divided into four sections, and the main female character Olive has a depressive disorder, who always gets hiccups and humiliates people around her. Brooks thinks that explaining Olive's problems or making her do something to persuade people to like her, such as releasing her emotions. To make Olivia live with "family space and uncomfortable closed relationships" has provided a useful shot that the cinema industry could be regarded as a media related to females and families [2].

The concept of independent women in films has attracted great attention, and the relationship between women's status and independent films seems to be able to be studied. Perhaps one of the ultimate tasks of independent film is to discuss the normal space and mode of thought associated with the female family, which is strongly associated with postmodern feminism. Similar things may also appear in Cindy Sherman's work.

### **3. THE WRITING AND SHOWING OF THE FEMALE BODY**

Despite her refusal to identify herself as a feminist, Cindy Sherman's work has been repeatedly discussed by postmodernist feminists as a model for deconstructive art. And her photography works seem to be more powerful when she has not explicitly admitted being a feminist. Interestingly, almost every postmodernist hates identity limitations. So maybe Sherman just wanted to have a free identity to make her artistic creations. Among Sherman's works, *Untitled Film Stills*, the famous series from 1977 to 1980, has attracted the most attention. Most of the pictures in the series were taken by Sherman herself and showed women from different social classes. Cindy Sherman's works are undoubtedly representatives of postmodern art which is full of elements such as deconstruction, destruction and subversion of traditional texts. As she said, she wanted to create an atmosphere that suggested a voyeur. In the frightened, confused and disturbed faces of the women in the photographs, Sherman can achieve the goal of "the death of the author," which is, according to Roland Barthes, to eliminate the meaning of the work and return the right of interpretation and feeling to the viewers. It is in this design that questions are raised: Who is this woman? What is she doing? More importantly, who was watching her?

The last question seems easier to answer, and almost every reader will subconsciously give the same answer: the man observes the woman in the picture. Whether they are looking in the mirror or displaying a pining expression at the unruly clothes on the bed, they are

actually engaged in what is known as the male gaze. Cindy Sherman said, "Every work I made is the result of being looked at from the perspective of a woman in a real culture." By showing the body under such a gaze, Sherman's real purpose is to create the image of women being objectified and imprisoned, to arouse women's independent thoughts and consciousness of liberating the body, expecting them to regain the right of control over their bodies. Although she may not be aware of it, such a physical expression has already completed the deconstruction of the traditional female image -- that is, by showing the pain of monotonousness and criticizing the stereotypes brought by monotonousness. Then, can such a physical display well resist the intrusive and hostile male gaze of patriarchal societies?

To answer this question, we can look at the second feminist movement in France, which gave birth to Hélène Cixous's *The Laugh of The Medusa*. Different from the famous *The Second Sex*, Cixous did not want women to be liberated by writing like men, and her theory strongly advocated female writing and body writing on the premise of retaining female characteristics. Because only in this way can we break up, destroy; and foresee the unforeseeable project [3]. The word body writing itself has the resistance indication of anti-Phallogocentrism, which represents an objection to androcentrism, and has the ultimate purpose of deconstruction. Because in Cixous's opinions, women's writing aims to break down barriers, hierarchies, rhetoric, and rules (apparently from men) [3].

Through sexual suggestion, body display and writing, Cixous wants to destroy the discourse system of patriarchal society and give women freedom and discourse, which coincides with Cindy Sherman's original intention. According to Foucault's gaze theory, only one gaze is needed, and women will become self-conscious monitors under the pressure of this gaze. They are disciplined by the existing social discourse system and are in a panopticon without knowing it. Although the male gaze is intended to form an all-around suppression of women, physical confinement is often used as the starting point. Women's body display and writing provide a very possible weapon against this social phenomenon.

In Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*, the woman in the picture shows a vacant and disturbed expression in front of the mirror. Although the naked body is suggestive and the pose is similar to the pornographic photos of the last century, the atmosphere created is far less ambiguous. According to Laura Mulvey's assessment of the series of photographs, readers and viewers can form their cognitive models, guessing Sherman's creative intentions in the absence of the author. Traditional leg shots or face shots incorporate different erotic narratives. The cutting out of a part of the body destroys

the compositional space at the beginning of the Renaissance...It's more like a poster or a portrait than a realistic movie picture [4]. Although most people know little about the technique of photography, they can perceive the female image Sherman intended to restore and they are influenced by such an aesthetic and objectification method. Sherman accurately recreated iconic women in pop culture through her makeup and movements that are contemporary and distinctive. In other photographs of the series, images such as mirrors, beds and windows also appear frequently. Mulvey's idea of a sense of plane takes it to the level of art, and Sherman's establishment of a pattern of female appearance based on it is the first step in the fight against the male gaze.

Behind the male gaze, is the operation of power and the expression of male desire. The two seem to have nothing to do with each other, but in fact, both can be attributed to Foucault's theory of power and discourse, which also provides a new perspective for today's view of cultural phenomena and cultural products. Through this gaze, men can achieve a kind of subtle exploitation of power, through language discipline, through what Judith Butler called performed -- the theory that female traits are not born but are performed through repeated discipline. Based on this ideological framework, Cixous's theory is likely to come true: Men have committed the greatest crime against women. Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their enemies...They have constructed the infamous logic of antilove [3]. Therefore, the structure of body expression and writing is one of the keys to resisting the male gaze and one of the important links of anti-Phallogentrism.

The choice of the body as a starting point is inseparable from Sherman's obsession with the body. As well as being an observation, part of it depends on a love-hate relationship -- an attraction and an aversion to makeup and glamour. It comes from the conflicting feelings of wanting to look as feminine as possible and feeling trapped by this social norm [5]. Therefore, Sherman refused to claim that she was a feminist, partly because of her moderate attitude, because of the existence of her contradictions, rather than subversion, it is better to call it remediation. On the other hand, Cixous persisted in her anti-Phallogentrism, although she was not radical and did not want to completely abolish dualism. Some scholars point out that Cixous's theory of female showing of the body can be an extension of Derrida's theory of "différance", that is, she tries to deconstruct masculinity within the structure. The manifestation of her body and female sexuality enabled her to possess power and to resist the destruction of that power by society.

Yet Cindy Sherman's claim that she is not a feminist may undermine her resistance, even though she is a

prominent representative of contemporary women's art. Her work is keen to express the anti-male gaze while at the same time encouraging women to explore the role they can play in society, albeit from an angle of the male gazing. It can be explained that although Sherman does not regard herself as a feminist, her works still open up a new perspective for women from the aspects of subject cognition and body liberation, and contain the features of postmodernism that subvert the original female stereotype with deconstruction thoughts. Shooter, designer, and co-star, Sherman has acted as actor and observer from the perspective of Phallogentrism and is committed to raising public awareness with her work. In addition, for Sherman, the identity of a feminist is not the premise to escape and fight against the male gaze, so her works still have a high degree of coincidence with the theories of Cixous and others.

In short, to view body display and writing as weapons of the anti-male gaze is a deconstruction of the linguistic system of Phallogentrism. Foucault's micro-political theory includes discourse politics, which advocates marginalized individuals to resist mainstream discourse hegemony and tries to avoid disciplining individuals into a unified discourse framework. To promote women's body display and writing is to disintegrate the mainstream discourse of patriarchal society behind the male gaze. Indeed, there should be no better way to confront conflict than by confronting it and liberating the body through visual impact and verbal guidance.

#### **4. THE INDETERMINACY FEATURES IN POSTMODERN LITERATURE**

After discussing the deconstruction of Sherman's work, there is still a crucial question to be addressed. Behind the writing of the female body, there is the characteristic of postmodernism of uncertainty, which is one of the theoretical sources of the so-called weapon. Under this characteristic, the identity crisis experienced by women is also the result of deconstruction to some extent, which can better promote the awakening of their consciousness.

The idea of indeterminacy is initially introduced in physics without a precise definition. Then this concept of indeterminacy is introduced into literature. Indeterminacy establishes a certain gap between readers and text, confusing readers or defeating their expectations. Thus, readers have to construct the meaning of text independently, doubt their construction, and correct their interpretation of texting to achieve the purpose of aesthetic appreciation. This already requires that the whole text remains open to readers' interpretation. Further, one of the foremost features of postmodern fiction is indeterminacy. Just as Ihab Hassan claimed that indeterminacy extends all over

people's behaviours, thoughts, and interpretation which compose the world.

As a key concept in postmodernism, indeterminacy mainly represents the result of decentration and evanishment of ontology. By the mid-60s, Ihab Hassan's renowned work *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture*, he proposed the definition of "indeterminacy": "the so-called indeterminacy refers to the diverse concepts to help describe a complex phenomenon, such diverse concepts as ambiguity, discontinuity, heterodoxy, pluralism, randomness, revolt, perversion, and deformation." (Hassan, 192) [6]

Take Faulkner for example. It might seem that some researchers believed the *As I Lay Dying* is a modernism novel at all, enacts his modernism in *As I Lay Dying* by seeking recourse to a present tense that undoes the formal armature of realist narration (Dabashi, 13) [7]. However, if this is so, what about the claim "For differences shift, defer, even collapse; concepts in any one vertical column are not all equivalent; and inversions and exceptions, in both modernism and postmodernism, abound (Hassan,183)" ? [8] We can find that Indeterminacy is a recurring feature of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Breaking the stereotype of Faulkner's researches is crucial. Postmodernism emphasizes openness and pluralism, which recognizes and tolerates differences. Even if Faulkner uses modernist fictional writing techniques in his novel, it does not demolish that there are postmodernist features in the novel disproved. A stable and definite theme does not exist in postmodern literature. To allow a thinking space for readers, the theme in postmodernism does not appear at all or appears in an elusive type. It seems that the themes of postmodern novels have turned to ambiguity and absurdity, just like the deconstruction of the linguistic system of Phallogocentrism. That is because In *As I Lay Dying*, readers can find more than one theme. The real theme of the work, beyond the dazzling techniques, is the reassessment of the human capacity for suffering.

Faulkner draws on his unique narrative method to reconcile and re-structure what appear to be complete fragments of memory, reconstructing the whole world just as he folds it apart. [6] The novel is a very tightly written account of the events that take place within the family of Addie Bundren, the matriarch of a family in the American South, from the time of her death until about 10 days after her death, and on the way to her funeral. The novel has the basic elements of all great novels: how to face life and death, the relationship between women and men, the good and evil of human nature, the relationship between the inside and outside of man's family, and so on. [9] Female identity is an important symbol of the novel because a corpse runs through the whole novel. It not only reflects the

encounter and misfortune of the Bundren family but also depicts the demise of the American Southern culture by presenting the female character Addie's love, the process of her death, which is still the theme that Faulkner wants to show. [10]

Alternatively, while the modernist model tends to assume that one's identity is often indeterminable due to the constraints of external circumstances; postmodernism believes that personal identity can only be a product of interpersonal relationships. In many of Faulkner's novels, the postmodernist questioning of female identity is already foreshadowed. Addie struggles all her life, but she doesn't know what she is striving for. The reason for this is that woman's lives are often deprived of, certain relationships that can determine their identity, especially with the people around them and with society, which inevitably leads them into a deeper identity crisis. The identity crisis is one of the major themes of postmodernist writing.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By and large, taking Cindy Sherman's photographic works as the starting point, we may draw on the theory of Hélène Cixous to obtain the theoretical weapon of anti-Phallogocentrism and anti-male gaze through the description and research of the situation of women under the male gaze. The theory of deconstruction and uncertainty has become a framework to support the anti-Phallogocentrism in both independent films and photoshoots, to promote women's body display and writing is to disintegrate the hegemony of the mainstream discourse of patriarchal society behind the male gaze and to view body display and writing as weapons of the anti-male gaze is actually a deconstruction of the linguistic system of Phallogocentrism.

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