

Realism, Formalism, and Classicalism: A Comparative Study of Chinese Women's Cinema Styles

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Abstract

Cinema is an important way for modern audiences to enjoy and appreciate stories, and women's cinema carries the mission of giving voice to women and striving for greater discourse. Due to the background, this research aims to examine three styles of Chinese women's cinema, compares Chinese women's cinema across three styles and analyzes the differing psychological responses of audiences. Narrative persuasion and media appreciation as the two measurement variables use to examine audiences' psychological tendencies while viewing different styles of Chinese women's cinema. The literature of realism, formalism, classicalism, media appreciation and narrative persuasion is conducted. A quantitative research method is adopted, and a quasi-experimental design research method is to measure the differences in media appreciation and narrative persuasion. Research sample is 150 students from the Communication University of Shanxi. Data of questionnaire is analyzed by using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. The research results show that compared to the other styles, the influence of classical-style women's cinema on narrative persuasion is more significant, while the influence of realistic-style women's cinema on media appreciation is more pronounced. The research concludes that classical style exhibits significantly higher levels than the formalist style and the realist style. In contrast, the realistic style evokes a more significant media appreciation response. Realism is the dominant aesthetic style of Chinese women's cinema, and truthfulness serves as the unshakable aesthetic mechanism underlying this genre.

Keywords: Chinese women's cinema; realism; formalism; classicalism

Introduction

There is a broad research scope regarding the psychological impact of stories on audiences. Film is an important medium for audiences to enjoy and appreciate narratives. Women's cinema, as a specific form of film, carries the mission of giving women a voice and advocating for their right to speak. However, it must be acknowledged that whether women's cinema considers the feelings of the audience is key to genuinely promoting feminist ideas and conveying women's perspectives to the world. In directing a film, directors not only focus on expression and performance but also direct the audience's attention and elicit a response. According to Bordwell et al. (2008), style is the distinctive pattern of techniques, and we tend to have expectations about style. Moreover, the technical decisions of filmmakers affect the ways in which audiences perceive and respond. When audiences watch Chinese women's cinema, different styles may trigger varying levels of enjoyment and appreciation, influencing

whether the audience is passively involved in the narrative or actively thinking and selectively participating in the narrative during the viewing process.

This research studies Chinese Women's cinema and examines the problem of which styles have more significant impact on audiences. This paper categorizes the styles of Chinese women's cinema into three groups and compares the different psychological responses of the audience. A quasi-experimental design is employed to investigate the differences in narrative persuasion and media appreciation as measurement variables when audiences watch different styles of Chinese women's cinema. The conclusion shows that narrative persuasion effect of the classical style is more significant than that of other film styles. While, the classical style exhibits significantly higher levels of character identification compared to the formalist style, and it is also notably higher than the realist style. Realism is the dominant aesthetic style of Chinese women's cinema.

Research Objectives

- 1) To examine among the three styles of Chinese women's cinema, which one has a significant impact on the audience's response to narrative persuasion.
- 2) To explore among the three styles of Chinese women's cinema, which one has a significant impact on the audience's media appreciation response.

Literature Review

The definition and conceptual domain of the term "women's cinema" is nearly as controversial as the term "feminism" itself (De Lauretis, 1990). Uniyal (2022) stresses feminism constructs gender socially. Consequently, the scope of women's cinema has been widely debated. As the theory and practice of women's cinema continue to evolve, western women's cinema can be succinctly defined as films made by women or intended for women. De Lauretis (1990) suggests that this involves considerations of "who is making films for whom, who is looking and speaking, how, where, and to whom." Sreeshan (2023) studies the transitions of women in accordance to local films to examine the resistance of women.

In the realm of Chinese theoretical discourse, films with feminist tendencies are generally referred to as women's cinema or feminist cinema; however, the specific meanings of these terms vary among scholars (Li, 2013). The primary criterion for judging women's cinema within Chinese academia is the identity of the creative subject. This means that films focused on the female experience, expressed through images, sounds, and other media, are considered part of women's cinema. Zhang (2014) asserts that a film made by a female director, editor, or actor is classified as women's cinema if it centers on women and is interpreted from a woman's perspective.

Based on the aforementioned definitions, we can identify three fundamental dimensions of women's cinema: being directed by women, presenting female themes, and exhibiting feminist qualities. To explore the audience's reactions to women's films and their effects on narrative persuasion, this paper defines Chinese women's films as non-genre narrative films made by female directors that stand in solidarity with women, express women's consciousness, and portray women's real lives and psychological states.

This study employs realism, formalism, and classicalism as frameworks for analysis. Giannetti and Leach (1999) suggest that even prior to 1990, films began to evolve in two major directions: realistic and formalistic, with classical cinema serving as an intermediary style that avoids the extremes of both realism and formalism. Zhang (2018) categorizes the aesthetic styles of Chinese women's cinema into realist style and formalist style. The primary classification of film styles in this paper is based on preferences for content and form, adopting the classification of realism, classicalism, and formalism as outlined by Giannetti and Leach (1999). The realistic style of film emphasizes the authenticity of its content, focusing on realism and reproduction (Kang, 2007).

Realists, in short, aim to preserve the illusion that their film world is unmanipulated and serves as an objective mirror of the actual world (Giannetti & Leach, 1999). In contrast, formalist cinema tends to emphasize technique and expressiveness. Directors within this genre are focused on conveying their subjective experiences of reality rather than how others may perceive it (Giannetti & Leach, 1999). The most extreme examples of this style of filmmaking can be found in avant-garde cinema. Classical style films, on the other hand, occupy a middle ground between realism and formalism, blending content and form without pursuing extremes. Hollywood classic films are representative of this classical style.

Regarding media appreciation, it involves an audience response that is fundamentally different from media enjoyment, with dimensions such as being moving or thought-provoking. Media appreciation is primarily applied to examine the audience's response to complex film texts and tragic films, which fall under the category of media psychology. The concept of narrative persuasion seeks to systematically uncover the mechanisms that make narratives particularly effective in changing attitudes and behaviors. Two mechanisms identified as central to persuasion (Slater & Rouner, 2002) are character identification (Cohen, 2001) and transportation (Green & Brock, 2000). It is important to note that narrative persuasion is based on the foundation of media enjoyment.

Hypothesis

H1: Classicalism elicits a significantly higher response in narrative persuasion compared to realism and formalism.

H2: Realism generates a significantly higher response in media appreciation than classical style and formalism.

H3: The media appreciation response and narrative persuasion response for formalism are significantly lower than those for classical style and realism.

Research Methodology

This paper employs a quasi-experimental design research method to measure the differences in media appreciation and narrative persuasion among realist, formalist, and classical styles in Chinese women's cinema. The population and sample, research tool, data collection, data analysis and conceptual framework are illustrated.

Research population and sample is from students at the Communication University of Shanxi and recruited 150 students as participants. Research tool is the media appreciation scale proposed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010). As for data analysis, questionnaire data is analyzed by using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. Conceptual framework is concerning the styles of Chinese

Women's Cinema, realism, formalism, Classicalism towards narrative persuasion and media appreciation.

The study adopts the media appreciation scale proposed by Oliver and Bartsch (2010). This paper focuses solely on measuring audience appreciation responses; therefore, two dimensions, moving and thought-provoking, are retained, while three dimensions, interesting, suspenseful, and artistic value, which cannot be quantified, are eliminated. All responses are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement.

Additionally, the narrative persuasion scale consists of the character identification scale (Cohen, 2001) and the transportation scale (Green & Brock, 2000). A comparison of the character identification scale and the transportation scale reveals significant similarities between the absorb dimension in the character identification scale and the awareness of surroundings dimension in the narrative transfer, as both dimensions assess the audience's concentration on the narrative, resulting in diminished awareness of their surroundings. Moreover, the mental imagery dimension in the transportation scale examines whether the audience is impressed by the film's protagonist. Both dimensions are highly duplicative of the character identification scale. Consequently, this paper retains dimensions from the character identification scale and removes those from the transportation scale. All responses in this section also use a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 indicating strong disagreement to 5 indicating strong agreement.

Research Scope

Participants are recruited from students at the Communication University of Shanxi through a campus-wide public elective course on film and television appreciation, for which participants have credit. 150 students are recruited as participants to see the films and then complete a questionnaire, excluding those who have previously seen any of the films. Three films are selected as representations of realism, formalism, and classical styles: "Spring Tide" (2019), "Baober in Love" (2004), and "Sister" (2021).

Research Results

The research results show that classicalism has significant impact on the audience's response to narrative persuasion, and classicalism is rated higher than formalism. The analysis of variance on the character identification scale shows that the dimensions of absorption, cognition and character identification exhibit significant differences among the experimental groups (all $P < 0.05$). Furthermore, the remaining variables do not show significant differences among the film style experiments (all $P > 0.05$). The LSD (Least Significant Difference) method is then used to compare absorb, cognition, and character identification (See Table 1).

Table 1 *Post hoc test results of film style character identification scale*

Variable	I	J	Δ (I-J)	SE	P	A two-by-two comparison
absorption	realism	formalism	0.370	0.189	0.052	
	realism	classicalism	-0.310	0.189	0.103	
	formalism	classicalism	-0.680	0.189	0.000	classicalism>formalism
cognition	realism	formalism	0.487	0.197	0.015	realism>formalism
	realism	classicalism	-0.013	0.197	0.946	
	formalism	classicalism	-0.500	0.197	0.012	classicalism>formalism
character identification	realism	formalism	0.206	0.132	0.121	
	realism	classicalism	-0.148	0.132	0.263	
	formalism	classicalism	-0.354	0.132	0.008	classicalism>formalism

Source: Compiled by this study

The absorption comparison indicates that classicalism is rated higher than formalism; however, there is no significant difference among realism, formalism, and classicalism. Second, the cognition comparison reveals that formalism is rated lower than both classicalism and realism, with no significant difference between realism and classicalism. Finally, the character identification comparison indicates that classicalism is rated higher than formalism, while there is no significant difference among realism, formalism, and classicalism.

The analysis of variance using the transportation scale shows significant differences in cognitive attention, suspense, and transportation across the film style experiments (all $P < 0.05$). Additionally, the remaining variables do not exhibit significant differences among the film style experiments. Comparisons are then made among cognitive attention, suspense, and narrative transportation (See Table 2).

Table 2 *Post hoc test results of the film style transportation scale*

Variable	I	J	Δ (I-J)	SE	P	A two-by-two comparison
cognitive attention	realism	formalism	0.493	0.193	0.012	realism>formalism
	realism	classicalism	-0.320	0.193	0.099	
	formalism	classicalism	-0.813	0.193	0.000	classicalism>formalism
suspense	realism	formalism	-0.110	0.197	0.577	
	realism	classicalism	-0.590	0.197	0.003	classicalism>realism
	formalism	classicalism	-0.480	0.197	0.016	classicalism>formalism

transportation	realism	formalism	0.166	0.137	0.229	
	realism	classicalism	-0.297	0.137	0.032	classicalism>realism
	formalism	classicalism	-0.462	0.137	0.001	classicalism>formalism

Source: Compiled by this study

The cognitive attention comparison shows that formalism is significantly lower than both realism and classicalism, with no significant difference between realism and classicalism. In addition, the suspense comparison indicates that classicism is significantly higher than both realism and formalism, with no significant difference between realism and formalism. Finally, the transportation comparison indicates that classicism is significantly higher than both realism and formalism, with no significant difference between realism and formalism.

Furthermore, the research result shows that realism has significant impact on the audience's media appreciation response. The analysis of variance for the media appreciation scale shows significant differences in the dimensions of moving/thought-provoking, lasting impressions, and overall media appreciation (all $P < 0.01$). Further comparisons are made among the significant variables (See Table 3).

Table 3 *Post hoc test results of the film style media appreciation scale*

Variable	I	J	Δ (I-J)	SE	P	A two-by-two comparison
movingthought-provoking	realism	formalism	0.793	0.195	0.000	realism>formalism
	realism	classicalism	0.540	0.195	0.006	realism>classicalism
	formalism	classicalism	-0.253	0.195	0.195	
lasting impression	realism	formalism	0.920	0.186	0.000	realism>formalism
	realism	classicalism	0.500	0.186	0.008	realism>classicalism
	formalism	classicalism	-0.420	0.186	0.025	classicalism>formalism
media appreciation	realism	formalism	0.456	0.117	0.000	realism>formalism
	realism	classicalism	0.301	0.117	0.011	realism>classicalism
	formalism	classicalism	-0.155	0.117	0.186	

Source: Compiled by this study

The result shows that the media appreciation response and narrative persuasion response for formalism are significantly lower than those for classical style and realism. The results of the moving/thought-provoking comparison reveal that realism scores higher than both formalism and classicalism, with no significant difference between formalism and classicalism. Additionally, the lasting impression comparison indicates that realism scores higher than both classicalism and formalism, while classicalism scores higher than formalism. Furthermore, the media appreciation comparison shows that realism scores higher than both formalism and classicalism, with no significant difference between classicalism and formalism.

Conclusion and Discussion

In Chinese women's cinema, the narrative persuasion effect of the classical style is more significant than that of other film styles. From the analysis above, it is evident that Chinese women's cinema in the classical style exhibits significantly higher levels of character identification compared to the formalist style, and it is also notably higher than the realist style. This suggests that audiences are more likely to be drawn into the narrative of the film when watching Chinese classical-style women's cinema, focusing on and identifying with the characters' emotions while forgetting about themselves and their surrounding environment.

Although the classical genre often deals with realistic subject matter, its audiovisual style attempts to align more closely with commercial films and "popular drama" in terms of expression (Chen, 2021). Through a modern aesthetic and visual style, this type of film tells women's stories while aiming for commercial success. This approach may weaken the audience's critical thinking while watching the film, making them more easily engaged in the storyline, which, in turn, unconsciously achieves the effect of conveying values.

In contrast, the realistic style evokes a more significant media appreciation response. Based on the analysis conducted, films in the realism genre score significantly higher than the other two genres in terms of media appreciation, with notable scores in both the moving/thought-provoking and lasting impression dimensions.

Realism is the dominant aesthetic style of Chinese women's cinema, and truthfulness serves as the unshakable aesthetic mechanism underlying this genre. Audiences are more likely to reflect on the issues of women's existence explored in these films when they are convinced that the women portrayed exist in real life. The results indicate that realism is more likely to provoke emotional responses and thoughtfulness, creating lasting impressions that lead to a greater appreciation of the film than the other styles.

In Chinese women's cinema, the formalist style elicits significantly lower responses in terms of media appreciation and narrative persuasion compared to other styles. Women's participation in experimental and formalist cinema began in the early 20th century, although such participation was limited at that time (Cohen, 2012).

Experimental and avant-garde films are genres that resonate with female filmmakers and play a crucial role in advancing female themes. While the formalist style of women's cinema can showcase stronger feminist elements, it often struggles to be accepted by general audiences in terms of narrative, characterization, and visual expression. Moreover, while this originality imparts profound meaning to the text, it does not effectively engage audiences emotionally, nor does it foster a connection that allows viewers to empathize with the narrative, thereby leading them to passively accept the attitudes presented in the film.

The conclusion of research stresses that the narrative persuasion effect of the classical style is more significant than that of other film styles. While, the classical style exhibits significantly higher levels of character identification compared to the formalist style, and it is also notably higher than the realist style. In contrast, the realistic style evokes a more significant media appreciation response. Realism is the dominant aesthetic style of Chinese women's cinema, and truthfulness serves as the unshakable aesthetic mechanism underlying this genre.

Recommendations

This research adopted quantitative method to understand the impact of three styles of Chinese women cinema realism, formalism, classicalism, on narrative persuasion and media appreciation responses. It is suggested the research scope may enhance qualitative research to understand nuanced differences embedded in audiences' reflexivity.

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