

The Representation of Females in TV Drama: Taking “Nothing But Thirty” as Cases

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Abstract: The topic of this thesis is to study the performances of female characters in the TV series “Nothing But Thirty.” The goal is to see if they deconstruct and reimagine female characters' roles in Chinese film and television works. Today, with advances in mass media technology, feminism has become a public issue. In the wake of the #MeToo movement in 2017, there is an emerging trend in the portrayal of women in film and television. The visible presentation of the female image is inseparable from mainstream ideology. Given that “Nothing But Thirty” can be considered a female-dominated show, it would be interesting to examine the way women are represented on TV. This will help further promote the study of female representation in film and television.

Keywords: female representation, TV drama, gender roles, female character

1. Introduction

In recent years, the number of female-themed TV dramas and variety shows in the field of mass media has been increasing, and the image of female media has changed from the invincible “Big sister” TV dramas to the current hot TV dramas reflecting the breakthrough and growth of women, such as “Nothing But Thirty”. “Nothing But Thirty” has landed in more than 100 countries and regions. It was broadcast on more than 20 platforms, including YouTube, Viki, iTalkBB, Dailymotion, Astro TV in Malaysia, Netflix Korea, Singtel in Singapore, and Viettel TV in Vietnam. In Malaysia, “Nothing But Thirty” has become the most watched Chinese TV series on new media in 2020, and the number one TV series on Astro Malaysia. “Nothing But Thirty” is a story about love, career, marriage, family, and other topics when women in their 30s are unmarried, married, and have no children. “Nothing But Thirty” shows women’s difficulties in urban life, workplace competition, love, marriage, and childbearing, as well as women’s growing up. It’s a female drama from a female perspective. The attitude and consciousness of the producer are unintentionally incorporated into the film, and its ideology is influenced and shaped by the social and cultural background. In other words, movies create sites of cultural norms defined by dominant ideologies. Therefore, the visible presentation of female images is inseparable from mainstream ideology. Given that “Nothing But Thirty” is supposed to be a female drama from a female perspective, it would be interesting to examine the way women are represented in film. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to study the performance of female characters in “Nothing But Thirty”, aiming to explore whether they deconstruct and reimagine the roles of female characters in the same type of TV series in the past.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Influence of Mass Media (Television)

George Gerbner once said, “Despite the seemingly daily emergence of new media, the collective ritual of television shows no sign of abating. Its influence is also increasingly global.” With the infiltration of new media, the form of TV as a traditional medium has changed, such as mobile TV, micro video, Internet TV, Internet video, and other forms that have appeared. Television has become a part of new media and still exerts a wide influence. TV drama culture contains a certain value orientation, in the content and form of various levels to meet the social needs and its development is suitable, close to and consistent. Gerbner proposed the concept of “acculturation”, which describes the unique influence that watching television has on viewers’ conception of social reality. The overall hypothesis of the acculturation analysis is that those who spend more time “living” in the world of television are more likely to view the real world in terms of the images, values, descriptions, and systems of thought presented on television footage.

With the rapid spread of mobile electronic devices, the development of new media technologies, and the prevalence of consumerism, we are being dragged into an image society with a colorful visual culture. Film and television culture have also emerged as important conduits for popular culture. Bordo points out that individuals, in order to ensure the “normalization” of the subject [1], will judge and “correct” their behavior and appearance according to socially established standards (or norms) provided by a particular cultural environment. In a world where mass media have an impact on people’s self-perceptions, standards of “normalization” are also largely built on it. After deducing this concept, Samalin comes to the following conclusion: When we think, our thought process is actually conditioned by social and historical conditions [2]. It can be understood that when we view images shared by mass media (e.g., advertisements, magazines, television, etc.), we are already influenced to some extent by the potential value of the images.

2.2. Images of Women in the Media in the Past

The dynamic change of the discourse power structure in mass media shows the potential energy change of the dual power of men and women in society. “One is not born a woman; one is made a woman.” Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her seminal book, *The Second (1949)*. Gender is seen as socially constructed, not biologically determined. Women portrayed in TV dramas and other media are stereotyped as weaker than men. These stereotypes are often seen as generalizations that broaden the limited knowledge of the binary gender component to include members of that gender [3]. Femininity is often associated with stereotypes of vulnerability and sexuality [3]. At the same time, according to gender norms, women are expected to spend more time with their families or near a mother figure. Therefore, Sunil believes that truly empowered female roles should be multi-layered and in-depth [4], creating women’s own stories and showing emotional and psychological strength different from men’s. There must be more than one dimension of diversity, or empowerment will be seen as symbolic. In addition, Joffe suggested that in order to improve this phenomenon, screen and related producers should try to challenge traditional gender narratives and no longer conform to stereotypical conceptions of female images. According to Simonton [5], the obstacles to the development of female subjectivity in mainstream narrative films and television works come from two aspects: the lack of real female images on the screen and the audience’s internalization of the mechanism of gender discrimination. According to Simonton [5], stereotypes and the scarcity of strong female personalities are prevalent in the film industry. Female images are produced and depicted in typical Hollywood narrative films mainly through the operation of patriarchal ideology. The flattening of the female image has symbolic significance as a cultural strategy of patriarchy.

3. Analysis of Female Role Image

The previous literature studies have outlined the formation of gender consciousness in society and the development of female roles in movies and TV dramas. Most of these works have discussed the influence of gender consciousness in society on female roles in movies and TV dramas, as well as the role of media communication in developing gender consciousness. At the same time, the author reviews the relationship between female portrayal and male gaze in the TV series, which helps the author reflect on the extent to which the female image, in the case of the TV series “Nothing But Thirty,” inherits or challenges the growth under the male gaze. However, most research and analysis usually focus on women’s appearance and stereotypes portrayed in movies. More scene elements and the relationship between newly developed female images and social ideology have received little attention. The study aimed to examine the representation of female characters in female-led television dramas. In this chapter, the author will analyze the drama “Nothing But Thirty” through its narrative and visual presentation so as to measure the performance of the three female characters in the drama.

3.1. Narrative Analysis

First, this study will conduct a narrative analysis of “Nothing But Thirty”. The analysis of a TV drama’s narrative is important because it forms a basic understanding of the story in the audience’s mind and guides the overall tone and emotional attitude. As a kind of narrative art, the plot is the key to TV drama. “Nothing But Thirty” has its own uniqueness in the narrative plot. As a work reflecting reality, the play does not have a grand narrative; it only focuses on the forefront of women’s issues in today’s Chinese society. “Nothing But Thirty” employs a multi-line plot. This TV play is based on sequential narration with crossover narration and multi-line crossover narration. This kind of multi-line narration crosses the main line and sub-line together and selects multiple groups of characters to connect the relationships among them, forming an interpersonal network with a strong sense of reality. It frames the development of TV series with multi-level characteristics to show a complete life and enhance their watchability. In the drama, the narrative is narrated alternately from the perspectives of three women, focusing on the numerous difficulties encountered by urban women in their lives and their self-pursuit, which breaks through the single-thread narrative of previous TV dramas. Different levels of female spirit are reflected in the ways and processes of solving conflicts encountered by the three protagonists. The British novelist Trollope thought: “Novels should be full of real characters; characters show the scene of everyday life, and the plot can carry this scene of life.” As an excellent career woman, Wang Manni worked hard and wants to be attached to men. It shows that she is wavering in her choice of independence. And housewife Gu Jia plot conflict mixed between career and family. She wanted to have her own career, but her husband didn't understand her, and she struggled to balance her family with her self-worth. The third narrative line in “Nothing But Thirty,” Zhong Xiaoqin, had an ordinary family and an ordinary job. Zhong Xiaoqin was an unformed female spirit at the very beginning. She was dependent on her parents before marriage and on her husband after marriage. The unexpected pregnancy and miscarriage became the biggest conflict in the plot line, and the intensified conflict between husband and wife leads to divorce, so that she was forced to declare independence.

3.2. Visual Analysis

The code is completed in accordance with the play’s content, so that the play’s content is presented and acted on the visual and auditory feelings of the audience. Language symbols and non-language symbols constitute the system of film and television symbols. The characters in TV plays are figurative and active visual images. The appearance and performance of characters are represented as non-verbal symbols, while the dialogue and narration of characters are represented as verbal symbols.

Therefore, the analysis of character shaping in “Nothing But Thirty” from the perspective of visual language symbols is the main research aspect of the code in this paper.

The shaping of the external image of the character mainly depends on the shape of the character under the makeup and hair modeling and clothing modeling, so the shape of the character is one of the main aspects of shaping the character to foil the plot. The “primacy effect” in psychology holds that people rely on the image of a person at first sight to make judgments about their identity, personality, and other information. As a non-verbal symbol, human appearance has a powerful function in expression and communication. The role of makeup and hair and clothing is the most prominent in character modeling. To analyze the representation of characters in “Nothing But Thirty,” it is necessary to consider not only the overall narrative and plot of the TV show, but also the specific visual expression method.

In order to reflect Gu Jia’s elegant taste as a city lady and her maternal and gentle nature as a mother, “Nothing But Thirty” called for Gu Jia’s makeup to be light and her hair to have soft curls. As a professional woman, Wang Manni was presented with simple makeup and straight hair in the early stages to reflect her image as a capable luxury shop assistant. Zhong Xiaoqin, as the representative of ordinary girls, mainly shaped the image of low-key leisure and lovely style, which is in line with the image of most ordinary girls. The most important feature in shaping Zhong Xiaoqin was that there was no clear memory point. In terms of Gu Jia’s dress style, many of Gu Jia’s clothes were neutral colors such as black, white, grey, camel, and Morandi colors. These colors tend to be low-key and easy to create a good texture with, helping to create a design that accords with her economic status and aesthetic taste. After being betrayed by her husband, Gu Jia wore more distant looks, such as red lips and a hair tie, when she re-entered the workplace. It can be seen that the creator hopes to show the change of Gu Jia’s identity from a housewife to a vigorous professional woman through the change of Gu Jia’s appearance.

As a luxury store sister, Wang Manni was financially inferior to Gu Jia, but she also wore expensive accessories and shoes worth a month’s income. From here, it also reflects that Wang Manni is a very materialistic person. “A woman of 20 looks at style; a woman of 30 looks at temperament,” she added. It can be seen that the original Wang Manni longs for a life like Gu Jia. The difference is that Zhong Xiaoqin’s clothes are mainly low-saturation colors, and they do not pursue material or brand. The creator tries to perfect the character’s “not outstanding” characteristics. However, when Zhong Xiaoqin got divorced, her look changed a lot. Aware of her habit of ignoring her own needs, Zhong Xiaoqin decided to change in order to highlight Zhong Xiaoqin’s self-motivated and self-growing state. Her look went from low presence to high presence, with big red lips and complicated dresses dominating the look. Although Zhong Xiaoqin gave up the high-presence style after the divorce, compared with the early style dominated by casual pants, soft skirts occupied the main position of Zhong Xiaoqin’s style at this time, so as to show the improvement of Zhong Xiaoqin’s maturity. A lot of times, people’s attitudes towards material things are just projections of psychological changes.

4. Results and Discussion

It’s not easy to completely deconstruct and reconstruct the binary narrative in film and television, especially for a role type that has long been stereotypically defined as a housewife. “Nothing But Thirty” endows female characters such as Gu Jia with strong and determined personalities and behaviors that are often thought to belong to men [3]. Miksch suggests that female representations of masculine-coded attributes may be perceived as threatening [6]. In the past, movies and TV dramas frequently portrayed housewives as nurturing, submissive, and spending all day at home doing housework. Sometimes the narrative also portrays domestic women as vulnerable women who need to be saved by men, and marriage becomes a solution for them to escape their grief [7]. Jancelewicz

links the description of the role of domestic women with social power dynamics and traditional gender roles [8]. In the past, the male protagonists in movies and TV dramas were hypermasculine. They possess either exceptional physical abilities or excellent attributes such as bravery, tenacity, and leadership [3]. In contrast, strong female characters, although capable and strong, always play the role of subordinate and metaphorically consumed [9]. These narratives are not divorced from the existing social power structure, in which men are often leaders and women are always passive objects.

However, the female characters created by “Nothing But Thirty” today display psychological and emotional strength that was rarely seen for strong female characters in the past. Women don’t have to cover up their feminine side in order to appear powerful, and their emotions are more equally and positively represented. In the TV series, characters like Gu Jia prove that they are strong enough to carry out the tasks they are trying to accomplish; they are decisive in deciding what they want and don’t want to do; they have the ability and will to do anything to achieve their goals (such as Gu Jia’s career); and they tend to save themselves and face problems themselves rather than relying on others to be saved. Their strength, decisiveness, and independence are expressed in the way they decide to grow out of their comfort zone, how they come to terms with strangers they’ve never met before, and how they make some decisions to achieve their goals. In traditional gender roles, being strong, decisive, and independent are considered male qualities that women are not supposed to possess. Yet the female characters in “Nothing But Thirty” portray these qualities throughout.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to explore female representation in the female-led TV series “Nothing But Thirty,” and the results of the analysis show that the show made a serious attempt to portray the main characters as independent women. The final result shows that female characters break away from stereotyped gender narratives and no longer rely on men for salvation. They no longer need the help of others to solve the problems they desire to solve. And the empowerment of female characters can also be seen in the way they fight back and ignore the sexism they encounter. In any case, these three female protagonists also break new ground for the future of female roles in Chinese films and television. They contributed to the acceptance of new gender tropes and power structures.

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