

Original Research Article

Jia Ling's YOLO from the perspective of new feminist narrative theory

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the integration of feminist criticism and film narrative in the context of the new era, focusing on the innovative narrative techniques and new feminist spirit embodied in Jia Ling's film YOLO. Combining social ideology with feminist perspectives, this paper uses metafilm theory to analyse how to present women's self-awakening and empowerment through narrative structure. Text Analysis YOLO breaks through the traditional gender framework, not only conveying the values of gender equality and self-identity for women, but also responding to contemporary society's renewed affirmation of women's empowerment.

Keywords: feminism; new feminist narrative theory; meta-cinema

1. Introduction

In modern film and television, the rise of feminist discourse has brought new reflections and reforms to narrative methods. Film, an important carrier of cultural communication, has gradually become a venue for the expression of female consciousness and gender issues. With the changes in the social context of the new era, female directors use their unique perspectives to reshape narrative structures, promoting the expression of female subjectivity and the construction of self-identity. This article uses Jia Ling's film YOLO as a case. Exploring the integration of feminist criticism and film narrative.

2. Literature review

2.1. Feminism

Feminism is a sociopolitical movement that promotes gender equality and women's rights. It focuses on gender inequality, oppression, and bias within social structures. In other words, it advocates that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. Historically, the feminist movement has gone through three phases: the first phase focused on women's suffrage and legal status; the second phase focused on social roles, educational opportunities, and workplace equality; and the third phase explored and implemented issues such as gender diversity and transgender rights. As society progresses, feminism has gradually shifted from advocacy for gender rights to exploring diverse identities, roles, and complexities. Today, feminism focuses on reshaping women's social, cultural, and political roles. From the 1980s to the 1990s, literature and film captured and integrated these themes, forming the initial wave of a new era.

2.2. Feminism and Chinese cinema

In contemporary feminist film studies, scholars have explored gender representation and narrative approaches in the Chinese context from multiple perspectives. Zhang Liang and Jiang Pei (2024) argue that the development of Chinese feminism must be rooted in local social culture, integrating Marxist views of women with real-life experiences. This aims to construct a path for women's liberation with Chinese characteristics. Jiang Ling and Ding Yajie (2024) argue in their film analysis that the formation of women's self-identity is not only a result of social structural change but also a manifestation of the cultural resurgence of female subjectivity. Other scholars have also supplemented this view. Tian Qiusheng and Wang Qin (2023) add that the significance of women's films should not be limited to the awakening of consciousness during social change; more importantly, they should find a place for women's voices within the inherent structure of visual narratives. Jiang Lili and Feng Hua (2024) analysed YOLO from the perspective of body narrative, arguing that the film depicts the process of women's self-awakening through the tension between the visibility of the female body and the self.

The development of feminism exhibits distinct contemporary characteristics and a profound theoretical foundation, embodying scientific, humanistic, and practical principles. The film YOLO aligns the expression

of feminism with the theoretical system of socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, constructing a parable about women's self-growth and social identity. The film, following the life story of Du Leying, depicts the self-awakening and struggles of contemporary women in a period of social transformation.

2.3. New narrative theory

New narratology is a new approach to narrative research that has emerged since the 1980s. It breaks away from the structuralist framework of traditional narratology, transcending the analysis of narrative structure and form to emphasize the cognitive, cultural, social, and ethical dimensions of narrative. This theory argues that narrative is not simply a way of telling stories but a crucial means for humans to understand experience, construct identity, and shape reality. Furthermore, New Narrative Theory is increasingly being applied to film analysis.

The film YOLO has already applied new narrative theories. Previous research on YOLO has primarily focused on the film's audiovisual language, directorial style, and emotional narrative, or compared it with similar films to analyze the differences in narrative logic and emotional expression among works about women. However, these studies often focus on plot structure, visual expression, or directorial intent, rarely providing in-depth theoretical interpretations of the film's narrative model and feminist spirit.

Currently, as shown in **Figure 1**, a Google Trends search indicates that red represents feminism and blue represents new narrative theory. In the past five years, there has been a lack of systematic research in China that uses new narrative theory as an analytical framework and incorporates a feminist critical perspective. This article aims to fill this research gap.



Figure 1. Research on new narrative theory and feminism in China over the past five years.

3. Methodology

This article uses extual and narrative analysis methods. Textual analysis focuses on understanding the text's meaning, context, structure, and metaphors; narrative analysis focuses on understanding the text's story structure, character relationships, and narrative logic. These two methods apply to analysing Jia Ling's film YOLO in terms of character relationships, story structure, and textual meaning.

A narratological perspective, through analysing the film's narrative hierarchies and timeline reconstruction, reveals how it breaks with traditional linear narrative models and forms a multidimensional narrative of a woman's coming-of-age. Textual analysis includes many aspects of film, including text, language, visual symbols, and image grammar. By interpreting the film's dialogues, camera movements, scene compositions, and symbolic imagery, explore how these textual elements together construct a feminist narrative context.

4. Character and narrative analysis

This section systematically analyses the text and narrative of Jia Ling's film YOLO, drawing on feminist new narrative theory. Through an in-depth analysis of the film's characterisation, narrative structure, and symbolic imagery, it explores women's self-awakening and identity reconstruction in the context of a new era, demonstrating its significance in promoting women's empowerment and building cultural confidence in the new era.

4.1. Character analysis

4.1.1. Du leying

Du Leying serves as the primary female protagonist in the film's "body narrative." The screenwriter develops a narrative centered around her, moving from decadence to self-redemption and reconciliation. In "Femininity as a Costume," Joan Riviere writes that intellectual women utilize the public mask of "femininity" to conform to male

expectations, forced to display feminine charm and appear non-confrontational, alleviating their fear of challenge and competition with men. "Femininity can be worn as a mask, both to conceal masculine traits and to deflect potential retaliation if those traits are discovered." Therefore, at the beginning of the film, Le Ying creates an image of laziness and lack of ambition. Her actions, such as her sister Duledan's demand for the family estate, her relatives' exploitation of her appearance on a TV show for publicity, and her encounter with Hao Kun, highlight Le Ying's inner conflict: she wants to change the stereotypes held by her friends and family, yet she doesn't know how to escape this predicament. Laura Mulvey's theory argues that the audience and third-person perspectives are all defined as male, occupying the same position. This illustrates Le Ying's fear of external scrutiny as a woman. Through boxing, Le Ying achieves both physical weight loss and psychological redemption and reconciliation. Whether in her gaze at other characters before and after the boxing matches or in her dialogue, the audience feels confident after the fight. Boxing, at this point, not only presents weight loss as a byproduct of self-growth, but also as a path to transformation and self-redemption and reconciliation. Meanwhile, Le Ying encounters numerous reflective objects, such as mirrors and glass, before and during training and before going on stage, symbolizing her progress in defeating her inner demons a true "win." The film also features intimate scenes between Le Ying and Hao Kun, defining all third-person perspectives as a form of voyeurism, characterized by male characteristics. The process of being observed engenders pleasure for the third-person perspective, and their appearance is coded to achieve a strong visual and sexual effect, imbuing them with the connotation of being "seen," expressing a male narrative stance.

4.1.2. Hao Kun

Hao Kun's appearance primarily serves as the film's male perspective. By portraying him as unprofessional and hypocritical, his role in the film is weakened, inverting the narrative method of mainstream narrative films, placing women as the main storyline and men as supporting plot points. Hao Kun's introduction as a boxing coach sparks Le Ying's competitive spirit and allows her to examine herself through the perspective of a third party, such as a man, allowing her to begin redemption. In the film, Hao Kun takes Le Ying to the gym's anniversary celebration, not only satirizing Hao Kun's marketing weakness but also paying homage to queerism. Queerism's most crucial tool is deconstructionism. By categorizing Le Ying as a fitness enthusiast at the gym, Hao Kun guides her in defining herself.

4.1.3. Cousin Doudou and Le Ying's biological sister Du Ledan

Both are essentially sophisticated egoists. Doudou and Le Dan are driven by their own selfishness, constantly exploiting and suppressing Le Ying. The interpersonal conflicts caused by sophisticated egoism primarily manifest in the antagonism between "others" and "self." The self is the end, others the means, the pursuit of self-interest negates altruism, and the dialectical unity of self-interest and altruism is denied. Doudou, in order to further her own directing career, sacrifices Le Ying's public image, manipulating behind the scenes and using her to create show effects. Du Ledan constantly suppresses Le Ying to gain a sense of superiority. For example, during a dinner, he forcefully demands that Le Ying transfer her property. After Le Ying successfully loses weight, he even declares that getting married is her "win." These incidents highlight Le Ying's inner weakness before her transformation and her strength after her transformation.

4.2. Body narratives from the perspective of female self-identity

YOLO uses Le Ying's physical and spiritual transformation as a thread to present women's pursuit of self-identity and liberation in contemporary society. By using the female body as the narrative subject, the film not only responds to feminist calls for autonomy and equality, but also criticizes the objectification and commercialization of the female body in consumer culture, leading the audience to re-examine the meaning of the female body.

The film's portrayal of an independent woman is a major highlight. Jia Ling's character not only undergoes a physical transformation from obese to fit, but also completes a spiritual awakening from dependence to independence. This internal and external transformation not only breaks the shackles of traditional gender roles but also, through the vivid portrayal of bodily transformation, conveys the power of women to reshape themselves. The film has thus become a symbol of women's self-liberation, while also reflecting the inherent dilemmas and real-world challenges faced by contemporary women in their pursuit of equality, prompting viewers to reflect deeply on the status and rights of women.

5. Conclusion

This article systematically analyses Jia Ling's film YOLO from the perspective of feminist new narrative

theory, aiming to reveal the re-expression of feminism and the awakening of female subjectivity in the context of new-era Chinese society. The film centres on the story of women's self-growth. Through Du Leying's physical transformation, psychological reconstruction, and self-narration, it depicts the process of women moving from being observed and narrated to active expression and self-definition. This narrative model breaks through traditional gender frameworks, transforming women from passive image bearers to subjects capable of reflection and expression. It embodies the profound integration of feminism with the core values of socialism in the new era. The integration of feminism and film is not only about self-redemption but also a cultural symbol that carries the ideological renewal and artistic shift of feminism within the context of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era. It signals that Chinese women's films are entering a new era of greater subjectivity and cultural awareness.

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