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Understanding the ‘Terrible Passions’ in A Streetcar Named Desire and Woman’s Struggle for Identity

Dantong Zhang

Department of Humanities and Creative Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, China

Abstract

The project of this study is to investigate how the censorship is arrived at in the film adaption of “A Streetcar Named Desire” and see how feminist criticism is related with the debated discussion of gender representation in cinema. The research scrutinizes woman’s struggle for identity under the social and historical context in the U. S. as the creation of cultural production is merely for entertainment, and the artistic value appears to be undervalued.

Keywords: film studies, gender representation, feminist criticism

1 Introduction

Tennessee Williams’ play “A Streetcar Named Desire” took place in New Orleans in 1947, it was also the base of Elia Kazan’s film version in 1951 (Kazan, 1951). The author describes women as submissive characters and interprets the production as a record of gender discrepancy which leads itself to feminist criticism. In post-war U. S. cultural productions, men were portrayed as powerful leaders in the family who see women as objects. This study will focus on the censorship of the film adaptation, the research question is: what scenes were cut off in the film that shows woman’s identity struggles? In the early 1930s, the Motion Picture Production Code was established, it intended to put a limitation on films which targeted at large audience. The Code was also known as “Hays Code” which was particularly noticeable in book-to-screen adaptations. It regulated motion picture content, prohibiting the portrayal of controversial storyline about adult topics and social mores (American Writers Museum, 2016). The censorship law was strict in the 1950s, in order to having “A Streetcar Named Desire” produced and approved, there was a fight with the Production Code Administration (McCarthy, 2011). I find that can be an important topic to discuss when looking at gender representation in cinema.

The story is about the heroine called Blanche Du Bois who is an ex-Southern Belle, her husband Allan kills himself when she finds out that he is a homosexual. This the deepest sorrow in her life that changed her forever. Blanche’s promiscuous behavior in her hometown caused her to lose the teaching job. The male character is called Stanley who was surliness compared to

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Blanche's preciosity. The two characters were too abhorrent to bear with one another, the tragedy happened: Stanley raped her when Blanche's sister was giving birth to a baby in hospital, Blanche got mad and was carried off to an asylum. Right here were enough to let the censorship team worried - the references of homosexuality and rape.

2 Literature review

Many studies have focused on woman's identity struggles in the film "A Streetcar Named Desire". In an article analyzing the question of identity in the film, Hooti (2011, p. 18) argues that the depiction about the process of identity quest for Blanche is thorough. The melancholic process of blending psychological and social factors in presenting Blanche as a powerless figure, and her life experience of withdrawing from reality and gender-based encounter plays an essential role in terms of understanding and dramatizing her search for self in the alien world.

The academic criticism about the film has been directed mainly towards the ethical and generic aspect. This viewpoint was brought up by a study conducted by Vlasopolos (1986), he found that the vulnerability of Blanche allows her to design the surroundings with extreme care, which also provide her the spaces to escape from the patriarchal rule of the reality and her promiscuous past. She tries to control the lighting, the decor and her sister, she only wants Mitch to see her at dusk because she lies about her age. Vlasopolos (1986) thinks that Blanche's power is merely for glow and shimmer, her obsession with clothes and jewelries shows that her vanity is part of she recognized herself as an upper-class lady. He argues that the generic and ethical yardstick is used to measure the success of a cultural production, and the film somehow failed because it has no moral instruction for the audience. The course of history makes the displacement of Blanche's expulsion and violation inevitable and even "natural" under the historical context.

The physical violence is Blanche's fight for Matron by the end of the film, some descriptions in the play like the "lurid reflections" and "inhuman cries" further tie the victimization of her with the complicity of rape that Stanley claims as a "date". In Vlasopolos (1986) and Samuel Tapp's (2010) works, they take the same approach of analyzing the character of Blanche. The sexual desire of both male and female tend to support Tapp's (2010) argument about considering Blanche as the victim of Southern Belle. The idealized self of women's subservience to be seen as past ideal during the 1940s, which can still resonate with whether a woman is "pure" enough for marriage in modern society.

According to Mulvey's (1975) essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*", she pointed out that women are simultaneously being displayed and looked at, if their appearance is with a

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strong sense of visual and erotic impact, they are considered as to-be-looked-at-ness. Mulvey (1975) used the psychoanalytic theory that she sees as a political weapon to illustrate the way that the unconscious of patriarchal society can affect film productions. She further demonstrated that woman stands in the patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, they are the bearer of meaning instead of the maker of meaning.

Cinema has changed over the past decades, the monolithic system based on the capital investment that exemplified by Hollywood in the 1940s is no longer there. However, Mulvey (1975) argues that the self-conscious Hollywood seems to confine itself to a formal mise-en-scene which reveals the dominant ideological concept of the cinema. The censorship group at that time had their own “correct standards of life” in terms of film making. Some of the production codes based the laws on were written by a Jesuit priest (Lev, 2003). There was no system established to distinguish between entertainment for grown-ups and entertainment for children, the PCA believed that it was their responsibility to censor the public therefore the show must be suitable for the mass audience.

With the passage of time, feminism has gradually gone deep into social conscious. Butler (1988) expresses her opinion from the perceptive of how social, cultural and political environment can impact on women’s liberation, her approach was different from the other researcher above who mainly scrutinizes the tragic flaw of women in film production. She says: “Feminist theory has sought to understand the way that systemic or pervasive political and cultural structures are enacted and reproduced through individual acts and practices” (Butler, 1988, p. 522).

Across these studies, there is consistence evidence that gender representation of woman in the film reveals how the quest of identity can profoundly affect women’s social existence. To a large extent, Blanche’s identity crisis and frustration sustained in an extravagant male world, her loneliness and inability of defining herself in a feminine paradigm brings different problems for her. Nevertheless, there is a luck of robust research on the censorship of the film adaptation, such as how many cuts were made and why some close-ups were deleted. Some scenes were considered as carnal, it even raised the possibility of the film being banned in several Catholic cities of America.

3 Research methodology

Elia Kazan’s film version shows a firm command of the source material in a way that keeps the originality of the play and enhances it in the screen (Kazan, 1951). He translates the conventional theatrical device of the “visual pause” to the screen. The visual pause is used for

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signifying the relationship between characters, it can be shown as two people standing far apart to show conflict. When Stanley and Blanche first lock eyes on each other in Scene 1 (Stanley takes her presence and she tries to strike up a conversation), they are placed on the opposite sides of the hallway, forcing them to keep their focus on one another. Kazan (1951) also uses camera to hyper focus on particular moments to enhance Blanche's destructive relationship with Stanley. The combination of closes ups and silent tension makes Stanley repellent and magnetic.

The ultimate measure of struggles represented in the production is the opposition of reason to unreason, the discourse of power and authority is shown in the film. Blanche's behavior shows the conflicts with the sentiment of self-contained woman that awakened during the 1940s, but she also tries to depict herself as independent which implies that her self-image is dependent on the way that men view her. In many ways, Blanche thinks that she needs a man not only to satisfy the expectations from the society but her own emotional needs. However, she does not resign herself to accept just any man (Davis, 1994). She expects for someone with the gentle qualities like Allan, but she also needs a man with paternalistic nature. Hence, Mitch becomes the one that she turns in an effort of finding "a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in" (Williams 387 & Davis, 1994).

There are symbols we can spot in the film, which reinforce Blanche's image as a fallen woman. The projection of Blanche's virginal appearance and identity onto her employs the motif of appearance versus reality as she is depicted as daintily dressed in white when arriving in New Orleans. In French, the name "Blanche Dubois" means "white forest". The word "white" means pure and noble, "forest" reveals her inner mysterious world which waved by death and desire (Zhao, 2016). She wants people to view her as pure, but her white dress is stained in the later scene of the film, which symbolizes false purity.

4 Conclusion

It is important for us to think about how the play has subsequently been adapted or found its way into later film and culture and understand its legacy in terms of gender representation in cinema. By analyzing the censorship and woman's identity struggles in the film, it enables us to understand the artistic value of the picture. For Warner Brothers, the film adaptation was just a piece of entertainment, it was business for them instead of art. In modern days, art is still political, it is constantly being "watched". The film was a big milestone in movie-making industry, it proved to be what the public felt like to watch, in an era that change was happening everywhere (McCarthy, 2011).

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