Star Images Constructed based on Kramer vs.Kramer

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Abstract

The Kramers vs. Kramers (1979) is a film that comprehensively examines the role and status of women under the traditional secular vision, where women have become subordinate to the patriarchal society and family. Through the construction of the protagonist Joanna's dissatisfaction with the social and ethical status quo, her struggle to subvert the existing status of women and her return to her own self, the story comprehensively reflects the difficult journey of women, represented by Joanna, to subvert the stereotypes and return to their own selves in the specific historical context of the time, revealing the self-value of Joanna's phenomenon to modern women.

Keywords

Star image; Feminism; Kramers vs. Kramers; Hollywood.

1. Introduction

Stars symbolise both social groups (nation, racial group, sex group) and unique individuals within those groups. Star images are typically created within specific cultural contexts and have a complex and abstract sense of social meaning. As stars, in some ways, are manifestations of ideological contradictions, analysing them helps to understand the relationship between cinema and society, creating a profound socio-cultural perspective. The 1970s was a period when the women's movement developed more significantly, and Smukler (2018) mentions that the feminist movement of this period gave rise to new films in which the image of women on the screen changed [1]. In what ways did it change? Following this lead, this essay will examine the Hollywood film Kramer vs. Kramer (1979). from this period. Based on the study of the star as a constructed text (Dyer and McDonald 2019) [2], this essay will present the star of Kramer vs. Kramer (Streep & Hoffman) as the primary text. With the rise of female consciousness as a central concern, the article is divided into two sections: the construction of the female image and the reconstruction of the male image. Through social context, star magazine, and film texts, this essay will explore how the image of the star in the film has changed; how the image of the star is constructed by social context; and how it differs from the real image; and conclude the relationship between men and women in the construction of the image of the star in the film Kramer vs. Kramer.

2. Construction of Female Image

In the 1970s, the United States was influenced by the various post-World War II civil rights movements and feminist ideologies. As a result, the divorce rate in the 1970s rose and the number of broken families in society grew. As a dominant ideology, Stars characterisation and film production are inextricably linked to social circumstances. Dyer and McDonald (2019) argue that our society shapes us, that the individual has always been political, and that the star's charisma must be understood within the context of their ideology [3]. Male writers (Men who treat women as subjects to be looked at) have always used a male perspective and discourse, or even a patriarchal consciousness, to regulate and shape the women in their minds, imbuing them with male subjective evaluations and aesthetic ideals. At the beginning of the film, Joanna

(Streep) lives a quiet life within the traditional thinking framework (Women's success depends on men, children, and family, and the value attached to others is the basis for their existence). Wittig (1993) once criticised that women are not born, they become women later [4]. A woman's destiny as a wife and mother is imposed upon men to limit her freedom. Thus, the female figure is not born, but is the result of socialisation, just as the heavy breathing Joanna suppresses at the beginning of the film threatens to collapse and explode at any minute. The contrast between Joanna's face and the darkness of everything around her becomes more three-dimensional, and this photograph (figure 1) becomes a typical portrait of Joanna — lost and despondent in her dreary life, but possessed of a profound love for her son (figure 2). In contrast is the opening shot of the husband (figure 3), where Ted (Hoffman) is chattering away about the minutiae of life and work. This repression and freedom exemplify the relationship between men and women in a traditional family setting. Nevertheless, Joanna's husband does not understand her and insists that she continue to play the housewife role, that is, to be the person he envisions, the patriarchal society expects from the 'ideal woman'. The image/stereotype that Streep portrays of Joanna may accurately represent a woman in mainstream society.

Figure 1. Movie screenshot

Figure 2. Movie screenshot

Figure 3. Movie screenshot

With the emergence of women's consciousness in society, the traditional mindset that confines women to the kitchen and bedroom does not satisfy the desires of female viewers anymore. Based on this, a new image of the star emerges, a rebellious woman who connotes a certain degree of desire in the audience. Jackie Stacey (1991) illustrates through a series of examples

that the star's image is a reproduction of the audience's identity [5]. Stars as an image have many effects on ordinary people, the biggest of which is the so-called compensatory effect, where many of the images that appear in the public eye are parts of the audience that are missing and longing for them. The film portrays Joanna's growing mental anguish due to her mundane existence and her inability to find herself, eventually leading her to decide to leave her husband, son, and family and go into society to gain a true understanding of herself. The construction of Streep's image represents the inner desires of women living in stereotypical patterns and stands in opposition to social prejudice.

In terms of morality, Streep's portrayal of Joanna does not betray her heart; what drives her away is the confusion that women have about their existence, the exceeding confusion about life and the future. The same is true of Hoffman's portrayal of Ted, a man who works hard to love his family, son, and wife. The awakening of female consciousness and the inherent gender norms of society each have their legitimate reasons for existence. The decision of Joanna to leave her husband and son is the result of her reflection on her own existence and the meaning of life, and it is worthy of our recognition from the perspective of a normal life experience. Her departure is a self-awakening of a woman under pressure, reconstructing her inner and spiritual beliefs about survival. However, this declaration, constructed on screen, is weak, and when the star's text is returned to social reality, it is difficult to escape the stereotype of the "ideal woman" in a patriarchal society, because this desire intrudes into a realm that does not belong to her own existence. As McMullen (1996) points out, people always associate the public sphere (work, society) with men and the private sphere (marriage, family) with women [6]. Based on the traditional view, Joanna's behaviour can be characterised as nothing more than fulfilling personal desires in pursuit of the vanity of financial independence. On the other hand, men give up marriage and family, often as a reflection of their dedication and hard work at work. As a traditional moral value, equating a woman's desire to be worthy of a career with her desire to satisfy her vanity is a prejudice. It is a retreading of the stereotypical image of women.

Laura Mulvey (1989) formed a significant camp in feminist film criticism by using mainstream American cinema as a research text for critically deconstructing and analyzing film's narrative mechanisms, revealing the absence of women in film-making and in the films created since the birth of cinema [7]. The classic Hollywood narrative is a good example of this. In Hollywood films, women are depicted in a way that appeals to men, as Joanna's post-runaway image did, attempting to appeal to aesthetic sensibilities. She has the right to pursue her own self-worth and development as an intellectual woman with a strong sense of independence and self-inquiry. But when Joanna finally stands up in court as an independent woman, she can no longer be justified, although she is not at fault, because she has neglected her family. The seemingly happy ending at the end of the film, when Joanna relinquishes custody of her son and leaves the camera on a slowly rising lift, is full of bitterness and helplessness from a woman's point of view. Joanna's final concession should be understood in two ways: on the one hand, it reflects Joanna's mental and inner independence and self-confidence, but on the other hand, it is a compromise and a concession in the face of powerful social norms for a woman who has run away. As a whole, society's prejudice against women stands out under male hegemony, and Streep's portrayal of Joanna is portrayed in a way that fits the perception of the traditional male audience - that no good can come from a woman who deviates from society.

The stereotypical portrayal of female stars is reflected in screen texts and social reality texts. With the dissolution of the Hollywood star system, and the female stars of the New Hollywood going from being goddesses to ordinary people, their images on and off-screen were no longer controlled as tightly by the studios as they once were. Their star image was shaped by their on-screen and behind-the-scenes images. So besides watching the screen, it is also important to study other texts, and magazines are one such area of interest. Dyer and McDonald (2019) suggest that a central theme of all fanzines is love[8]. Although this statement seems a little too

absolute today, it is still a reference for the star magazines of the 1970s. For example, this magazine report, which appeared in 1980 (Figure 4), describes Meryl Streep as a successful woman who portrayed a timeless image as an actress, but also stresses that in reality, Streep was a woman who was attentive to her family, who was considerate of her husband and at ease in her role as a mother. According to Stacey (1991), stars and audiences are interchangeable through the cultural ideal of femininity [9]. When this feminine ideal is removed from the picture and Meryl Streep is brought back to reality, what is observed is that her life is not fundamentally different from that of the audience. The woman has achieved her own success in the public sphere, but she must eventually return to the social reality of the private sphere, where male power and female power inevitably collide. Although Streep makes a traditional subversion in her role in the film, this subversion is only within the Hollywood system since she is still a product. Despite the relative contradiction between the virtual and social realities of the screen, this contradictory image helps make her more relevant to society on the whole. David Stevens (2012) proposes to base the star's image on a similar paradox to reach contemporary audiences better [10]. As the audience shares the emotional experiences from the past with the on-screen character, she achieves female freedom and synchronises the realities of society to bring herself back to her family. Women in society are perhaps, as the magazine Streep herself says, "I would like to be as adventurous in films as I have been on stage" [11]. As a whole, Streep's constructed and real image of fame is contradictory, socially conditioned, and unequal under the conflict between male power and female power.

Figure 4. Magazine [12]

3. Reconstruction of Image of Masculinity

Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze treats women as objects to be looked at and men as the bearers of the look [13]. Much of the preceding textual analysis also attests to the fact that women live under a male society, with the screen image shaped from the perspective of the male viewer. But with the rise of feminine consciousness, Hollywood cinema as a capital vehicle also needs to present the text in another line. So a critique can be made of Laura Mulvey's view that men can also be the object of scrutiny. However, in a patriarchal society, most of those with power in the film industry are still men, so an analogy can be drawn between the relationship between male and female stars in films and the relationship between men and women in reality. As the dominant consciousness of patriarchy and the women's movement collide, a new image of masculinity is construed. This masculinity is as much about highlighting dominant social values in the film and presenting an appreciation of the new masculinity. In addition, it is about resisting the onslaught of external female forces. As a result, the next element to be examined is how male star images are construed from a female perspective.

In the Kramer vs. Kramer film text, two-thirds of the footage focuses on the male Ted, creating an ideal father figure. The film celebrates Ted's transformation of his family role and spreads the idea of men returning to the home and sharing family responsibilities. Before his wife left home, Ted was a competent provider for his family. He worked hard, and his wife and children were well fed and clothed; he was confident in this family role and wanted his wife to be content and happy in her role as a good wife and mother. From the female perspective, he imposes his ideas on his wife from a strong male position, making Joanna feel less of a whole person and frustrating her in the family. His wife's departure forces Ted to take on the responsibility of looking after the children. The details of preparing breakfast in a hurry and sending the children to school without knowing what grade they are in reflect Ted's previous lack of responsibility in family life. Ted is not indifferent to his responsibilities to his family, but he defines his responsibilities only in the realm of work, and his father figure is incomplete. Again, this is satisfying for the female viewer, who can stand up to the family and blame the men for their actions. Donaldson (1993) argues that what makes up hegemonic masculinity is the condition of the existence of women as potential sexual objects for men and the negation of men as sexual objects for men [14]. In Kramer vs. Kramer, Hoffman's Ted does not have the right to simply look at women; women escape their original existence as sexual fantasies, so the original heroic male identity is broken.

The rupture in the original image of masculinity provides men with a new model of the hero, and this passive heroic model can also bring about wonderful changes. For example, a passage in the film's text in which Ted speaks in court about what makes a good parent contains his reflections on his previous lack of fatherly duties and his sense of his changed role. The final shot of father and son preparing breakfast together is all emotionally harmonious and humorous, in contrast to the first breakfast after Jonah's initial departure from home (Fig. 5), and Ted's image of a complete father is fleshed out and matured. In his return to family and responsibility, Ted redeems himself and in doing so, gains the audience's understanding and emotional acceptance. In contrast, Joanna is portrayed as having gained her own freedom but losing her family and being subjected to a certain amount of controversy, and in the end, it is still the male who triumphs. It can be seen that with the rise of the female perspective, the hegemony of the male perspective is overthrown. The dominant, hegemonic masculinity that had been embodied in the male stars is changing. There is being created new masculinity in Hoffman's confused and insistent approach to life, a heroic image that is not heroic and which is more in line with the ethos of most American sensibilities. As masculinity becomes increasingly difficult to categorise, it becomes possible for men to be erotically displayed and gazed at.

Figure 5. Movie screenshot

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the construction of the image of the hero and heroine in the film Kramer vs. Kramer in a 1970s feminist context. Streep is portrayed as a subversive actress in Kramer vs. Kramer, but her subversion is kept strictly within the boundaries of Hollywood. Furthermore, the representation of Meryl Streep in star magazine reveals how the construction of the actress reflects the complexity of the dominant ideology. In addition, the essay considers Hoffman's portrayal of the male figure as reconstructed under socially complicated conditions, illustrating the possibility that the female vision also exists and that the male figure can also be subjected to the gaze. However, due to its limited storage and space, it only briefly illustrates reconstructing the male figure in the film text, while the social text is neglected and does not achieve the level of the wider society. Also, in the text, the construction of the image is simply illustrated in terms of gender themes, and the consideration of only two stars is insufficient in summarising the defining characteristics of the construction of the image of female and male stars in this period. By analysing the gender of the male and female protagonists, Hollywood, while reflecting the fruits of a certain female movement, has been subtly diluted. Female stars remain far from their true selves, and they are still shaped according to the male gaze. According to McMullen's article (1996), Kramer vs. Kramer is a vehicle for the American dream. As society advances, however, this so-called dream will need to be improved, and the construction of the image of the star will need to be given new elements as it develops.

Acknowledgments

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Filmography

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