



# An Analysis of the Rise of Women's Cinema from a Semiotic Perspective: A Case Study of the Film Herstory

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## ABSTRACT

Her Story, a women's film written and directed by Shao Yihui, challenges traditional gender structures and patriarchal discourse by creating idealized female characters and instrumentalized male characters. This film represents the rise of women's cinema, reflecting the awakening of global gender equality consciousness and the transformation of social structures. The emergence of women's cinema is closely related to equal rights movements and gender equality policies. Meanwhile, advancements in digital technology have lowered the barrier to production, enabling female creators to express the female perspective more broadly through independent films and streaming media platforms. Women's cinema undertakes a significant deconstruction and reconstruction of gender symbols at the narrative and semiotic levels. In Her Story, the English title Herstory cleverly subverts the traditional male-dominated historical narrative by replacing "his" in "history" with "her," thereby incorporating women's voices into the historical framework. This transformation of linguistic symbols demonstrates a challenge to and a reshaping of gendered discursive power. Furthermore, most male characters in the film are symbolized by functional titles, while female characters are endowed with richer symbolic meanings, breaking the monolithic nature of traditional gender identities and affording women more autonomous and diverse expressive space. The film also showcases the richness of symbolic imagery through the dislocated interpretation of everyday objects, a treatment that not only challenges the fixed meanings of traditional symbols but also enhances the complexity and depth of the female characters within the family and society. Although women's cinema has made cultural and social progress, it still faces issues of symbolization and consumerism. In the future, women's cinema needs to break through the singular gender framework to explore more diverse expressions of cultural symbols. From a semiotic perspective, women's cinema can promote the further development of gender equality and cultural diversity, becoming an important force for social change.

## 1. Introduction

The representation of gender in cinema has long served as a mirror of cultural ideologies and social hierarchies. As feminist critique continues to interrogate the symbolic construction of

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femininity and masculinity on screen, women's cinema has emerged not only as a genre but as a discursive intervention. This study approaches *Her Story* through a semiotic lens, examining how symbolic systems within the film articulate, disrupt, and reconfigure gendered meaning. Rather than focusing solely on narrative content, the analysis foregrounds the film's use of signs, linguistic choices, and visual metaphors to challenge normative gender frameworks.

The decision to center this inquiry on *Her Story* stems from its deliberate manipulation of symbolic codes—titles, objects, character functions—that resist conventional cinematic grammar. By tracing these semiotic strategies, the research aims to uncover how women's cinema can operate as a site of ideological resistance and cultural re-signification. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in feminist film theory, particularly those concerned with the politics of representation, the instability of gender categories, and the transformative potential of symbolic disruption.

## **2. Research Background**

*Her Story* is a film released in November 2024, written and directed by Shao Yihui. It is a quintessential women's film that shapes idealized female characters and instrumentalized male characters, challenging traditional gender structures and patriarchal discourse (al-Hibri, 1982). In recent years, women's cinema, as a critical art form, has flourished globally.

The prosperity of women's cinema is inextricably linked to the rise of global consciousness regarding gender equality (Eco, n.d.). The #MeToo movement in 2017 exposed issues of gender-based violence and power inequality within the film and television industry, encouraging more female creators to speak out and prompting the industry to re-examine gender issues (Schoon et al., 2007). Various countries have also introduced policies to promote gender equality, such as Sweden's "50/50 by 2020" initiative, which provides greater resource security for female creators. These changes have provided societal support for the development of women's cinema.

For a long time, film narratives were male-centric, with female characters often simplified or tokenized (Harrison). With the spread of feminist theory, this tradition has gradually been dismantled. The "male gaze" theory by scholars like Mulvey revealed the objectification of female characters, providing a critical tool for women's cinema. The return of female narratives has endowed female characters with more authentic and multifaceted expression, allowing women's cinema to gradually gain greater cultural influence.

The popularization of digital technology has significantly lowered the threshold for film production, allowing more female creators to enter the field. The rise of independent cinema has expanded the creative space for female-centric themes, while streaming platforms (such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, etc.) have provided global distribution opportunities for women's films. These technological advancements have allowed a wider audience to access narrative content from a female perspective, injecting new vitality into women's cinema.

## **3. Conceptual Definitions**

### **3.1 Women's Cinema**

Women's cinema refers to film works that are centered on women, manifesting female consciousness and concerns in their subject matter, perspective, or the identity of their creators (Tian et al., 2014). Domestically, women's cinema can be categorized into three types: films with

female protagonists or a focus on female themes, films imbued with feminist ideology, and works directed by women (Chandler et al., 2001). Overall, this genre aims to portray the living conditions of women, focus on their unique experiences and perspectives, and explore their roles and status in society.

### **3.2 Semiotics and the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Gender Symbols**

Saussure proposed that a sign consists of a signifier and a signified, with the meaning of the sign being socially and culturally constructed rather than naturally inherent. Gender symbols (such as female images, behaviors, identities, etc.) are therefore seen as the result of cultural meaning-making, not biological determinism. Peirce further classified signs into icons, indexes, and symbols. Laura Mulvey once stated that cinema, through its lens-based language, objectifies women into objects of spectatorship. This symbolic system perpetuates the gender order of patriarchal culture, where women are symbolized as objects of male desire.

Julia Kristeva, through her theory of "intertextuality," emphasizes breaking the fixed meanings of symbols to endow female symbols with diverse and dynamic possibilities. She argues that language and symbols are not fixed but are in a constant state of flux (Panerai et al., 2018), and the reproduction of cultural meaning can be achieved by deconstructing old symbols and constructing new ones. In women's cinema, traditional gender symbols are often deconstructed; women are no longer monolithic "mothers" or "lovers" but complex, multidimensional individuals. By subverting classic narratives (e.g., women taking the initiative in courtship, rebelling against family discipline), these films reveal the culturally constructed nature of gender symbols. In the process of reconstruction, women's cinema endows female characters with new symbolic meanings. For example, Barbie reshapes traditional gender stereotypes with parody and irony, transforming women from symbols of fragility or subordination into independent, autonomous individuals. As a representative women's film of 2024, *Her Story*, with its distinct narrative strategies and symbolic expressions, demonstrates the practical significance of semiotics in women's cinema through its reshaping of female character symbols, making it a key case for semiotic analysis.

## **4. A Semiotic Analysis of Her Story**

### **4.1 Linguistic Symbols and Discursive Power**

The English title of *Her Story* is translated as *Herstory*. This translation not only reflects a gendered transformation of the word "history" at a literal level but also reveals, on a semiotic level, the latent conflict of gendered discursive power. In English, "herstory" replaces the "his" in "history," cleverly subverting the traditional subject of historical narration—the predominantly male-led "his story".

From a semiotic perspective, "history" as a word is composed of "his" and "story," implying the construction of history from a male perspective and with male subjectivity. History is seen as the "story" of men, its discursive authority and interpretive power long held by them, while the voices of women in historical narratives have often been ignored or marginalized. The title

*Herstory*, by replacing "his" with "her," effectively incorporates women's voices and experiences into the framework of history, bringing "women's stories" to the center of public discourse. This challenges the traditional gendered symbolic structure, re-endowing women with subjectivity in historical narrative and transforming them from "silent" symbols of the past into beings with discursive power.

Furthermore, among the film's main cast of characters, apart from the protagonist Wang Tiemei and her child Wang Moli, the names of other characters, especially male ones, are often simplified pronouns or functional titles, such as Little Ma, Little Hu, and "the guitarist". It is particularly noteworthy that the protagonist's ex-husband is almost entirely nameless, referred to only by the singular designation "ex-husband". Here, "ex-husband" is not just a "signifier" in semiotics; it directs the "signified" toward the "symbolization of male identity" by lacking any personalized identifier. In other words, "ex-husband" represents a specific social role (a divorced man). This naming convention reveals the construction of male characters' identities in the film: they not only lack depth and personality in the plot but are also compressed, in a semiotic sense, into the symbol of a social role—that of a former husband, purely serving a functional role in a family relationship rather than being an independent individual.

This discrepancy in naming is not just a treatment of characters but an implicit critique of social gender relations. By symbolizing the male characters, the film

Her Story cleverly dismantles gender bias and traditional narrative structures, advancing the reconstruction of female narratives and the awakening of social gender consciousness.

#### **4.2 The Reconstruction of Symbolic Imagery: The Dislocation of Meaning in Everyday Objects**

A scene in the film, where Xiao Ye (Wang Tiemei's neighbor) plays a sound-guessing game with Wang Moli (Wang Tiemei's daughter), skillfully demonstrates the reconstruction of symbolic imagery and the dislocation between the signifier and the signified of everyday objects. The design of this scene not only embodies the deconstruction and reconstruction of sound symbols but also reveals how seemingly simple items in daily life are transformed into carriers of multiple meanings through symbolization.

In this game, little Moli guesses different sounds and tries to assign them specific contexts or meanings. For instance, she guesses a crackling sound is "an autumn walk," when it is actually her mother chopping vegetables. She guesses a brushing sound is "the desert," when it is her mother brushing shoes. She guesses a rumbling sound is "thunder," when it is her mother shaking out wet clothes. This series of dislocations reveals the multiple meanings of sound as a sign in specific contexts, while also challenging conventional ways of understanding symbols.

From a semiotic standpoint, sound here acts as the signifier, while our accustomed "autumn walk," "desert," or "thunder" are the conventional signifieds. But these sounds do not perfectly align with their traditional signifieds; instead, this dislocation breaks the symbolic associations of daily life. For example, the sound of chopping vegetables being misheard as an "autumn walk" is not just a deconstruction of the sound but also a challenge to conventional perception. In our daily lives, certain sounds are automatically linked to specific situations or objects, and this scene uses dislocation to remind the audience that these everyday objects and sounds can indeed have different interpretive spaces and cultural contexts.

Moreover, through these dislocated guesses, the scene actually imbues everyday objects with greater symbolic meaning. The sound of chopping vegetables is not just an expression of domestic routine; through its connection with the image of an "autumn walk," it suggests a warm and tranquil family atmosphere. The sound of brushing shoes is associated with "the desert," a connection that may metaphorically allude to the fatigue and challenges in the mother's life. And the sound of

shaking wet clothes being mistaken for "thunder" might symbolize the mother's response to and struggle against the uncontrollable elements in her life. These objects and sounds are transformed from their original functional symbols (e.g., chopping, brushing, laundering) into symbols rich with emotion and significance, enriching the film's narrative layers.

This reconstruction of symbols reflects the film's questioning and subversion of traditional symbolic meanings. In conventional narratives, sounds, objects, and scenes often have fixed symbolic meanings, serving as background or contextual signs to advance the story. However, in

In *Her Story*, the director re-signifies these everyday objects and sounds, elevating them beyond their surface functions or symbols to become multi-layered emotional carriers that express the film's profound insights into daily life, female characters, and family relationships.

In summary, the reconstruction of symbolic imagery in this scene does more than present a lighthearted parent-child game. Through the dislocation of signifiers and signifieds, it shatters the traditional symbolic framework, allowing every simple household object to be endowed with greater symbolic meaning. Through this technique, the film successfully injects rich emotional layers into daily life and, in doing so, deepens the substance of the female characters, further reinforcing the film's narrative strategy from a female perspective.

## **5. Conclusion**

The rise of women's cinema is not only a manifestation of a cultural phenomenon but also a reflection of the growth of global gender equality consciousness and a rethinking of traditional patriarchal culture. Through symbolic methods,

*Her Story* places the names and stories of its female characters at the core of the narrative, while men are simplified into auxiliary symbols. This reconstruction of linguistic symbols offers women the opportunity to redefine history and discursive power, embodying the breakthrough of women's cinema within social structures.

Women's cinema continuously pushes beyond traditional gender frameworks, exploring diverse cultures, gender fluidity, and technological integration. In a postmodern context, gender fluidity has become an emerging theme, and semiotic analysis reveals its interaction with power discourse. Concurrently, with advancements in digital technology, new media such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence provide innovative symbolic expressions for women's cinema, redefining its semiotic significance.

Feminist cinema, through a symbolized "her" narrative, attempts to subvert traditional gender structures and empower women with discursive authority. However, this symbolic expression sometimes shows a tendency to be "overly forceful". To emphasize female subjectivity, many women's films rely excessively on ornate symbols and exaggerated visual presentations, causing the narrative to often remain superficial, failing to delve into more complex and profound social gender issues. For example, by employing extreme gender reversals, symbolizing male characters, or focusing excessively on images of female independence, these films, while breaking traditional narratives, may overlook the diversity and complexity of gender issues. This formalistic breakthrough may not genuinely reflect the profound social context of gender equality and could instead become part of a symbolic consumerism, diminishing the film's critical edge and depth.

Setting aside such gimmicks, the creation of women's cinema should perhaps focus more on in-depth analysis and reflection on issues such as gender structures and power relations.

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