

A Comparative Study of Female Narratives in Dogville and Prima Facie from the Perspective of Theatricalization

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Abstract. Female narratives in films reflect filmmakers' in-depth exploration and critical reflection on women's living dilemmas, spiritual pursuits, social roles, and their marginalized status within the context of patriarchy. As representative works of theatricalized films spanning over the past two decades, *Dogville* (2003) and *Prima Facie* (2024) both adopt highly stylized dramatic structures, stage-like scene designs, and concentrated dramatic conflicts. While sharing similar experimental traits, the two films differ in narrative focus. Grounded in a shared rebellious core, they have each developed a distinctive and innovative cinematic style in female narration. The former reveals the evil of human nature and the dual oppression of women by patriarchy through an allegorical town, while the latter exposes pervasive gender injustice within legal discourse via a singular personal story. Employing diverse approaches and perspectives to construct female narrative, the two films establish unique visual languages and narrative strategies, combining storytelling quality, avant-garde spirit, and artistic merit.

Keywords: theatricalization, female narrative, female image

1. Introduction

The experimental film *Dogville* breaks the conventional film narrative mode and visual expression with a unique minimalist theatrical presentation, constructing an allegorical space beyond reality and guiding the audience to reflect on the complexity of human nature at an abstract level. Though not the director's original intention, the film has rebelliously broken the tradition in shaping female images in practice. *Prima Facie* breaks the limitations of theatrical space by virtue of Jodie Comer's exquisite one-person multi-role performance, extending the plot to multiple social scenes such as family, workplace and court, and extensively discussing social public opinion issues such as gender conflict, women's rights protection and the "patriarchal" judicial system. Despite being born in different creative backgrounds and artistic forms, the two works share the same rebelliousness and innovation in the application of theatrical techniques and the expression of female narratives.

2. Literature and works review on female narrative

Female narrative is not equivalent to feminism; the former specifically refers to the narrative means of highlighting feminism through creation in the fields of literature and art, with a narrower scope

and stronger professionalism. Female narrative presents feminism to a greater or lesser extent.

The *Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, one of the founders of the feminist movement, has made a profound analysis of women's social status from a philosophical perspective, laying the ideological foundation for the theory of female narrative. Starting with "Women and Fiction" at the beginning, *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf expresses women's desire for an independent space and creative freedom, breaking the dominant position of the male perspective in traditional narratives. The pioneer works of feminism in this period mostly focused on women's encounters in private fields such as family and marriage, as well as women's exploration and identification of self-identity, emphasizing the existential value of women as independent individuals.

Published in 1981, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* by American scholar Susan S. Lanser is regarded as the pioneering work of feminist narratology, attracting the attention of many scholars. Since then, a number of works combining narratological research with feminist research have been published one after another. "A Loosening of Tongues: From Narrative Economy to Women Writing" by Maria Minich Brewer questioned the critical method of structuralist narratology that ignores the social and historical context, and "Toward a Theory of the Engaging Narrator" by Robyn Warhol explored narrative strategies from a feminist perspective. Susan S. Lanser also published "Toward a Feminist Narratology" in the American journal *Style* in 1986, in which she used the term "feminist narratology" for the first time in this manifesto-style paper.

In the later period, the focus of female narrative gradually expanded from the single awakening of female consciousness to the discussion of diverse identities and power relations. Women are no longer regarded as a homogeneous group, but a collection of individuals with diverse identities such as different races, classes and sexual orientations. Female narrative began to focus on the common destiny and differences of women with different identity backgrounds, as well as women's position and struggle in the social power structure. *The Color Purple* by black female writer Alice Walker, in the form of epistolary narrative, tells the growth and awakening process of black woman Celie under the double oppression of race and gender. The work not only shows the difficult situation of black women in a white-dominated society, but also reveals the oppression of women by black men, and discusses the living predicament and resistance of women under the interweaving of various power relations such as race, gender and class. The theory of female narrative in this period was also influenced by post-structuralism, deconstruction and other ideological trends, paying more attention to the analysis of narrative forms and language expressions, and holding that narrative itself is a manifestation of power, and women can subvert the traditional power structure and strive for their right to speak through the use of narrative strategies.

As the seventh art with strong comprehensiveness, film has great expressive space and potential in female narrative. *Thelma & Louise* came out in 1991 and is regarded as a classic feminist film that protests against the patriarchal society. In the following two decades, many excellent feminist films have emerged one after another, including *Barbie*, *Promising Young Woman* and *Hidden Figures* abroad, and *B for Busy*, *Her Story* and *Like a Rolling Stone* in China, which have aroused widespread public attention to issues such as women's career development, educational opportunities and social status.

3. Advantages of theatricalized female narrative

As artistic categories, film has only a history of more than 100 years, while drama has existed for thousands of years. The two have a relationship of learning from each other and enriching expression, and the trend of integration has also attracted attention. The difference between film and drama lies in its "original" nature, which can be desired infinitely but ultimately unattainable, and it

is a "real presence", but the process follows a completely different path from drama. Due to its low degree of imagination and allowing direct contact with the audience, drama has a greater advantage in "intervention" than film. For film to exert its unique signifying function, it is bound to make more efforts to define itself [1].

Feminists believe that traditional discourses, meanings and orders are all defined by men, and the film grammar of genre films also takes satisfying male desires as the core. Therefore, women need to use a series of anti-mainstream and anti-male gaze film elements to complete the writing of themselves and the objective world. Films with women as the main body often pursue avant-garde and innovative forms of expression. For example, the creation of theatrical documentary films represented by *Prima Facie* transforms theatrical performances into corresponding video works through multi-angle, multi-camera shooting and real-time editing, which is a modern and information-based extension of André Bazin's ontology of the image. Its highly free space, symbolic props, representative character shaping and actor performances are extremely in line with the narrative requirements of feminism to blaze a new trail. However, the director of *Dogville* had no intention of female narrative subjectively, but had a strong exploratory color of feminism in the practice of pioneering experimental style.

4. Theatrical elements and female narrative

4.1. Theatrical space and women's existence

Theatrical space is the material carrier of female narrative in the two films. The degree of spatial openness is often directly related to the degree of independence of the female subject.

Drawing on Brecht's "Verfremdungseffekt" theory, *Dogville* constructs a symbolic narrative space for the audience with a minimalist theatrical setting. At the beginning of the film, the audience is presented with an almost blank space, with only simple chalk lines outlining the general outline of the town, and the location of the houses is only hinted at with simple marks. The three-dimensional space is deliberately flattened, and the entire town is condensed into an abstract symbol, floating between reality and imagination. The town has a closed layout, with only a narrow road connecting it to the outside world, implying the townspeople's resistance to the outside world. The houses are closely arranged, but lack real communication and interaction, and people are superficially close but inwardly alienated. When the heroine Grace first enters the town, the house she lives in is marked on the edge of the town, which directly indicates her identity as an "outsider" and implies the rejection she is about to suffer.

In *Prima Facie*, on the contrary, the heroine starts with a nearly 10-minute monologue self-introduction. The stage space is open and bright, with tall bookshelves on both sides and a wide long table in the center. The heroine sometimes climbs over the desk and sometimes runs back and forth on both sides of the stage with a brisk movement rhythm and exaggerated gestural range, showing the vitality of a young elite woman incisively and vividly. With the development of the plot, Tessa is raped and her life falls to a low point, yet the stage layout still leaves sufficient white space; when Tessa meets with repeated setbacks in seeking justice and confronts her inner turmoil alone, the stage uses cold blue lighting and "artificial rainfall" to express her sorrow, but the frequency and amount of rain are extremely restrained and concentrated in the center of the stage, implying the openness and upward trend of the ending.

Both *Dogville* and *Prima Facie* intentionally leave white space, but for different purposes: the former intends to highlight abstraction and experimentation in form, while the latter focuses on expressing emotions and ideas in content. As a genuine "one-person show", *Prima Facie* has higher

requirements for the actor's performance style. Starring Jodie Comer plays multiple roles alone, the film highlights the main body, the theatrical space converges inward and focuses, and the female character is the main part while the space is secondary. *Dogville*, on the other hand, places the "Virgin Mary" Grace in an abstract environment to observe her living state. The female character is regarded as a carrier of moral metaphor and bears the pressure of space on subjectivity.

4.2. Theatrical props and female symbols

Traditional film semiotics intentionally emphasizes male sexual characteristics under the guidance of patriarchal thinking. Necessary props frequently appearing in early police and gangster films, such as guns and cigarettes, are basically male "exclusives". The sixth finger cut off when Cheng Dieyi was a child in *Farewell My Concubine* symbolizes the castration of male organs, and the old man's abnormal love for his adopted daughter in *The Bow* finally turns into a phallic arrow. The director examines all kinds of women marginalized by the structure with the compassion of a male chauvinist perspective [2].

The feature film *Thelma & Louise* has made a rebellious innovation. As "fugitive criminals" fleeing from their families, the two heroines skillfully use guns and cigarettes, and do "men's things" as the protagonists of a road movie. In 2023, *There's Still Tomorrow* highlights and deconstructs traditional female elements shaped by society through the heroine's act of wiping off her lipstick while exercising her suffrage at the end of the film, and incorporates some parts of theatrical expression into the feature film's narrative. For example, the segment where the heroine is domestically abused by her husband is presented in the form of dance, depicting a special sense of shock.

Fully theatricalized female films show a more comprehensive rebellious spirit. While traditional film audio-visual elements such as editing are weakened, the setting of specific props is more elaborate.

Lars von Trier, the director of *Dogville*, does not belong to the feminist film genre, but through pioneering experiments and a relatively neutral expression technique, he inadvertently presents a feminist narrative tendency, with feminist ideas emerging as a by-product of the emphasis on experimentation.

There are numerous props with symbolic significance of female symbols in *Dogville*. A shabby chair appears many times in the film, which is a tool for the townspeople to show their power and status in front of Grace. When Grace does all kinds of chores for the townspeople, she can often only sit on this broken chair to rest briefly, while the townspeople, shot from a low angle, stand aside and give orders, highlighting that the power relationship between the two is unequal. The film simplifies the three-dimensional images of buildings, streets and even dogs into two dimensions, but the small porcelain figurines that Grace gets in exchange for her work are expressed in the normal three dimensions. The narrator directly points out, "But as the porcelain pulverized on the floor it was as if it were human tissue disintegrating. The figurines were the offspring of the meeting between the township and her. They were the proof that in spite of everything, her suffering had created something of value." Grace's tears herald a great spiritual turning point for her. Absolute and ideal kindness is utterly defeated by pure and plain "banality of evil", and the final choice to massacre the village seems extreme but is reasonable in the circumstances [3].

Prima Facie is a typical feminist film, and the use of props in female narrative is much more purposeful and guiding than that in *Dogville*, focusing on the combination of reality and artistry.

The stage layout of the whole film is simple, without complex props and gorgeous decorations, but the different scenes are clearly distinguished. The court scene is equipped with tables and chairs,

legal documents, notebooks and pens, the seats representing judges, lawyers and juries are neatly arranged, and the lighting is mainly blue and black with a serious and cold style. The home scene has a small but refined selection of sofas, coffee tables and household items, with soft lighting creating a warm and relaxed atmosphere. All the stage settings serve to depict the living environment and character symbols of the heroine Tessa.

To realize the rapid transformation of scenes, the film needs to move tables and chairs many times, replace background props and so on to change the stage layout quickly. In the process of transformation, the actor's performance plays a key role. Through the cooperation of body movements and language, the audience's attention is guided, so that the audience can naturally keep up with the changes of scenes without stiff pictures. When switching from the court scene to Tessa's home scene, Jodie Comer tidies up the documents in the court while speaking retrospective lines, pushes the table and chair aside, then picks up the cushion on the sofa and sits on the sofa. Movements, lines and props themselves constitute a part of the scene, and their switching also naturally changes the scene, making the narration integrated. The actor is both a part of the stage background and a component of the character symbol.

4.3. Theatrical molding and female images

In the 1930s and 1940s, early genre films represented by film noir were full of masculinity. Female characters were mainly designed as a single and flat femme fatale image, basically without subjectivity, and their behavioral decisions revolved around the male protagonist. In 1957, the heroine of the suspense classic *Witness for the Prosecution* appeared with an unconventional cold and mysterious image, once creating complex traits such as coldness and egoism that the mainstream society thought were unique to men, but the ending took a dramatic turn and returned to an infatuated woman who was characterized by infatuation and willing to act and provide perjured testimony for her husband. Decades later, *Contratiempo* also used this model. The shaping of female characters has experienced two layers of transformation: "narrow evil - broad goodness (foolish goodness)" and "scheming - used/deceived by men". It seems unconventional, but the "broad goodness" implicitly deepens the rigid stereotype of women being irrational and emotional.

The two films focused on in this paper are both theatrical films after 2000, which are significantly different from the previous genre feature films in character shaping. Both films highlight a single heroine and develop the narrative network of the whole film by unfolding and radiating outward around her.

Tessa in *Prima Facie* can be called a typical "strong female lead". Although she is hurt by sexual assault and falls into a low point, she still shows an independent struggle on the whole; Grace is more symbolic. She is also raped, but her reaction is always that of a submissive "saint" before the climax of the village massacre, and there is no embodiment of subjectivity for 90% of the time.

Grace believes that human nature is inherently good, and thinks that as long as she is kind enough, she will definitely get the response and respect of others. In her cognition and imagination, *Dogville* is like an Arcadia, where people are simple and kind, help each other, and there are no disputes and ugliness from the outside world. Grace is actually the embodiment of the audience's ideals, and her experience is essentially the director's discussion on whether the spirit of "pure kindness" can survive in a complex human nature environment.

The greed and selfishness of the townspeople are gradually exposed in an environment of unequal power. From increasing labor to double physical and mental torture and even sexual assault by male townspeople, the oppression escalates step by step in the more than three-hour story, and Grace's reaction gradually breaks out from the initial silent endurance, to the later painful struggle,

and then to the choice of massacring the village. But until the end, her resistance has not completely broken away from "a certain kind of rule". The biggest suspense of the whole film is her relationship with the gang leader, and the ending reveals that this person is her biological father. Under her father's long-term control, Grace lacks rationality and an independent personality and can only rely on others to make choices. Without her father, she soon finds Tom as her backer in Dogville. Stimulated by Tom's excuse, her revenge is an impulsive choice, and she still relies on the power of her father whom she originally hated. It should be said more as a return rather than a rebellion. Dogville reflects the sexual oppression of women by men in an unequal environment, but it does not break away from the consciousness of patriarchy. There is a conflict between the father and the lover over the ownership of the daughter, and the rationality of the father's rights is emphasized. Finally, the daughter returns to patriarchy, and the power relationship is expressed in the way of "love" through artistic processing. No matter what the father and the lover choose, women appear as property, and their behavioral choices cannot surpass the established patriarchal and male chauvinist framework [4].

The director needs a protagonist who is idealistic and even naïve in both thought and behavior, and due to long-standing stereotypes, female characters are far more likely to be cast in this role than male ones. Even so, Dogville symbolizes the heroine in an extremely restrained way, and the focus remains on the discussion of human nature. Regardless of whether the heroine's choice at the end relies on patriarchy or not, the objective result is indeed quite rebellious. There are numerous victim settings in traditional film and television works that damage the female image and are innocent and ignorant. Women are naturally placed in the level of "inferiors", especially in genre films such as crime and thriller that claim masculinity. In recent years, popular commercial films such as *The Pig*, *the Snake and the Pigeon* and *Detective Chinatown 3* have simplified and stereotyped female images to varying degrees, and the image of wives in Hollywood horror films is even more stereotyped as "panicked". The task of deconstructing and constructing the richness and authenticity of female image shaping in world cinema away from the male gaze still has a long way to go.

Prima Facie is an excellent attempt at the unconventional shaping of female characters. Unlike Grace who drifts into the town as a fugitive at the beginning, Tessa appears as a legal elite from the start. She firmly believes in the legal system and thinks that as long as she follows legal procedures, she can achieve a fair verdict. Starting from being sexually assaulted by a colleague, her world view collapses completely, and her identity is instantly transformed into a helpless victim of sexual assault. In the current judicial system, Tessa has encountered many injustices. Her experience is an epitome of what many women may face in real life. As an elite lawyer, she should have a relatively high status and right to speak in society, but even so, after being sexually assaulted, she still falls into a predicament of inferiority similar to Grace's. The theory of victim blaming and the society's high moral requirements for women make it extremely difficult for sexual assault victims to safeguard their rights. However, Tessa is not much influenced by patriarchy. Women in her era have gained a certain degree of improved status, and oppression is more presented in an implicit form. Although the conflict between the struggle for women's rights and the male-constructed judicial system is admittedly simpler than the tension between the innate human "pure goodness" embodied in Grace and the banality of evil, Tessa's struggle shows more independence than Grace's, marking a significant progress in the shaping of feminist character images.

4.4. Theatrical rhythm and female trauma narrative

The plot of Dogville presents a progressive sense of oppression. The relationship between the townspeople and Grace experiences the process of "harmony - deterioration - further deterioration -

extreme abuse - being massacred". The plot rhythm has quite large ups and downs, yet the film's audio-visual and performance are extremely restrained. The calm narration and delicate psychological description make the audience feel a strong sense of depression and empathy when watching from a God's perspective, and have enough time to feel and reflect on human nature and social criticism.

The early part of *Prima Facie* has a slightly lengthy problem with a lot of monologues and self-introductions. The climax occurs when Tessa's identity suddenly changes from a legal elite to a victim of sexual assault. Through the rapid plot advancement and strong emotional expression, it quickly grasps the audience's attention.

In the concluding part of the film, Tessa delivers an impassioned speech in court, calling on people to pay attention to women's rights and oppose gender discrimination. This NT Live work boldly breaks the fourth wall, directly pointing the camera at the audience in the theater, and the warm applause outlines a beautiful vision for the future of women's rights [5]. On the contrary, after breaking her utopian thinking, Grace still returns to the embrace of power symbolized by her father. The director does not emphasize patriarchy, but habitually constructs the symbolic image of "dependent" women and "relied-on" men. A deeper universal metaphor is that the darkness of human nature may never be resolved by kindness. No matter men or women, morality itself cannot stand the test and is difficult to survive under extreme conditions. *Prima Facie* holds an optimistic attitude towards the optimization of the shallow institutionalized and framed judicial system, while it is questionable whether the trauma to women and even society caused by gender violence and bottom-line breaking revealed in *Dogville* can be resolved.

5. Conclusion

Though born in different eras and bearing different creative original intentions, the two works share the experimentation of theatrical expression and the rebellious core of female narrative. Both break the audio-visual logic of traditional films, take theatrical space as the carrier, theatrical props as symbols, theatrical molding as support and theatrical rhythm as the vein, deconstruct the rigid female images under the traditional patriarchal narrative to varying degrees, expose women's living predicament in the patriarchal context and social system, demonstrate concern for women's fate and reflection on the unequal order, and provide a highly referenceable creative example for the female narrative of theatrical films.

Dogville proves the accidental compatibility between the pioneering experimental style and feminist ideas, providing a possibility for the interpretation of female narrative in non-feminist-oriented creation. *Prima Facie*, in the form of a theatrical documentary film, realizes the in-depth integration of female narrative and realistic issues, providing a referable path for contemporary feminist film and television creation. The two together confirm that theatrical techniques, by virtue of their abstraction, focus and appeal, can accurately capture women's inner world and living predicament, make female narrative more tense and in-depth, and also provide important enlightenment for the creation and research of female narrative in subsequent theatrical films.

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