

An Interpretation of Female Images in Blindness from the Perspective of Foucault's Power Discourse Theory

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Abstract: *Blindness* is a movie about the epidemic of blindness. In the film, nearly all the residents of the city get infected with the virus of blindness and get quarantined in three different wards. A small community is founded in the isolation wards where there happens a story about exertion of and resistance to power. Based on Foucault's power discourse theory, this paper attempts to analyze the manifestation of power and focuses on the female characters in the movie, and examine their resistance to power in the film.

Keywords: *Blindness; Power discourse theory; Foucault; Female images*

1. Introduction

The film *Blindness* is about a story in which residents in the city suddenly get infected with the epidemic of blindness and the city gets into a chaos. In the isolation wards where a small community is constructed, the evil and selfish people in Ward Three have the absolute power over those in Ward One who have been exploited and lost their interests and even self-esteem. However, where there is power, there is resistance. Women in Ward One are attempting to resist against the power exerted by men in Ward Three and striving for their own rights of survival. This paper aims to analyze the manifestation of power in the small community – the isolation wards, and how female characters resist against the power in the tough environment.

1.1 Introduction to *Blindness*

Blindness is a famous movie that is adapted from the novel of the same name, which is finished by José Saramago, the Nobel Prize winner for Literature in 1998, whose works have been appreciated by a large number of readers. It tells a story about the epidemic of blindness which suddenly hit the world like a flu. Nobody knows how it is caused, how they get infected, or how they can be treated. People get infected one by one. Gradually, all the patients are quarantined in the wards where the people, however, are experiencing the disorder in the wards and a sense of fearfulness. However, it is only the doctor's wife who is free from the contagion. She accompanies her husband in the ward and initially takes charge of looking after the infected and blind people in Ward One. However, in Ward Three, there are some evil people like the guy born blind and the man who claims to be the chief of Ward Three. They have tough demands on the patients in Ward One. The latter can do nothing but be subject to their exploitation. Against this backdrop, the doctor's wife eventually recognizes the discipline and thinks about resisting against that. She, together with other patients, attempts to resist the tough oppression by the Ward Three although the process is not smooth. Finally, they go back to their own homes and regain a normal and visible life.

1.2 The Status Quo of *Blindness*

Despite being acclaimed and shown at various film festivals abroad, few scholars have noticed this film. Yang (2020) makes a review of the films of plague narrative, notices the irony narrative and magic realism in *Blindness*, and also makes a comprehensive comparison between *Blindness* and other movies in terms of their narrative paradigms and more specific topics in the films. Zhao (2008) focuses on the strength of female characters and praises their personalities. In terms of foreign research on this movie,

Rueda (2015) focuses on the topic of dystopia and situates the book's film adaptation in the context of urban Latin American cinema in the new millennium.

To summarize, it can be found that *Blindness*, as a relatively successful epidemic film, neither has received enough notice, nor has it been analyzed from the perspective of Foucault's power discourse theory. Therefore, this paper attempts to examine and discuss the female images in the film based on Foucault's power discourse theory.

1.3 Foucault's Theory of Power and Discourse

Michel Foucault is a famous and representative French philosopher in the Western world. His ideas and theories entail diverse subjects ranging from literature, politics, medicine, sociology, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, criminology and more. Among all his achievements, Foucault's theory about power is the most representative one. The traditional theory of power focuses on who holds power and who drives it, i.e. who makes the decision, while Foucault focuses on how power happens, that is, how the decision is made and what the outcome is. (Chen, 2019) His new theory of power repeats that power is not only punishment, sanction, repression, restriction, but also has the function of creation and production. (Ding, 2018) Foucault explains that power is not a simple top-down relationship in which the class with power oppresses another class, but "a complex strategical situation in a particular society" (Foucault, 1978). It is a complex and ubiquitous dynamic network, which permeates every field of society. He is against the dualism between the ruler and the ruled. (Huang, 2012) In his opinion, the power is not the overall binary confrontation, but forms and operates in various social groups. He argues that power is not "a certain strength we are endowed" (ibid), nor is it owned by any individual, class or organization. Instead, it is a process in which all kinds of power relations change, enhance or subvert them through continuous struggle with each other.

Discourse has a close connection with power. Where there are human beings, there is discourse, and where there is discourse, there is power. Foucault defines discourse as "systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak" (Lessa, 2006). On the one hand, power produces and controls discourse, and exertion of power relations produces new discourse. On the other hand, discourse is the medium through which power can exercise and be expressed. However, since discourse is a series of incoherent segments and there is acceptance and rejection in the world of discourse, discourse is not always submitted to power silently. (Huang, 2005) Therefore, discourse can be a tool of power, and it can reinforce power, can also weaken power, so power is unstable. Power punishes individuals using representation of discourse—laws and regulations, permeating into their life and controlling their body and soul accordingly. Foucault (1980) says "the relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated or implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse". Power and discourse should be put together owing to the inseparable relations between them. Moreover, Foucault believes that power is decentralized. (Wang, 2008) Where there is power, there is resistance. All are in power, and all resistance can only be within power. There are no centers of power or resistance.

Based on Foucault's theory of power and discourse, this paper aims to examine the manifestation of power in the film, and attempts to answer the question of how the power framework is constructed in the quarantine wards, then analyze how the female characters represented by the doctor's wife resist against the power.

2. Analysis of Power Discourse in Blindness

Doctors and government officers fall into extreme panic and confusion when they suddenly encounter the pandemic of an unknown virus of blindness. Therefore, they decide to isolate the people who get infected in the wards, in which, however, patients' basic living needs cannot be met and the living conditions are rather poor. In the space with the increasing population, a small community is formed and the power of a certain group is naturally manifested. However, people under the discipline of power are not always submitted to power. In order to ensure their rights and interests, patients in Ward One begin to break the governance of power by Ward Three. Therefore, the following two parts will discuss how the power is manifested and resisted in the wards in this film.

2.1 Manifestation of Power in Blindness

The power frame in this film is mainly constructed through the camera language, characters' lines and roles' behaviors or actions. This section will examine the three kinds of methods one by one.

2.1.1 Camera Language

The director has utilized a lot of techniques and camera language to manifest the power relations in the wards. When a large group of infected people are guided by the guard or manager of the ward to enter the isolation ward, they are shot with high angles. Such camera language can further reflect their vulnerability and helplessness and suggests their relatively weak position in the power frame of wards.

When the infected people who just enter the wards have not yet become accustomed to the blind life here, they are naturally fearful in an unfamiliar environment; however, the ringing of gunfire suddenly rings out, which is a symbol of power. Subsequently, there appear people's exclamations, followed by the cold voice of command from the loudspeaker by the guards of the wards. Just as Xia (2015) mentions, voice has its role in constructing the images of characters. The voice and tone of the chief can demonstrate the cruelty and evilness in his nature, which is an essential part of constructing the power. Meanwhile, the voice of command from the loudspeaker is spreading in such a way that it suggests that the patients in the wards are trapped and threatened by the power.

When the doctor's wife comes out and follows the guard's directions to catch the shovel they need, the dramatic Dutch angle further strengthens the cold and ruthless quality of guard and patients' helplessness and confusion. It is also a visual way to tip the power scale in the guard's favor.

2.1.2 Characters' Lines

Apart from the camera language, characters' lines or dialogues also serve as a tool to construct the power relations in the small community. The chief of Ward Three's announcement through loudspeaker like "We are taking over the hall now. I'm the king of Ward Three. There will be a lot of changes from now. Everyone, if you want to eat, you have to pay for it..." and "Ward Three is going to take charge of the distribution of food right now, like the store, like the real world. We will guard the store, OK?" is an effort to establish the power frame in the ward. The sentences are short and clear, thus increasing its powerfulness. After his announcement, he continues to sing a song with the superficially peaceful lyrics "I just call to say I love you"; meanwhile, the camera keeps moving slowly and focuses on the ruined and disordered corridor in the ward, and the song is spreading alongside. A sharp contrast forms between the seemingly peaceful and friendly song and the horrible reality scene, which signals further exploitation of their interests and rights for the people in Ward One. Later, the chief in Ward Three gives his order that they can get food only at the expense of the sacrifice of women in Ward One.

2.1.3 Behaviour and Actions

When distributing the food, the chief of Ward Three is always treating the people in need of food in an unfriendly and disparaging way. He tends to look down upon and gives some insulting nicknames to indicate his dominant role in the power frame. For example, he throws food vigorously into the distance without fear of waste or care for the food and patients.

When he requires to exchange the women for food, in the intercourse, the men in Ward Three are absolutely brutal and crude, accompanied by the language violence and physical violence, which fully indicates the unequal power distribution.

2.2 Female Characters' Resistance to Power in Blindness

As mentioned above, according to Foucault's theory, where there is power, there is resistance. Under the discipline of the power, people, especially the women in the Ward One gradually recognizes their eventual needs and the necessity to resist against the power.

2.2.1 Camera Language

When the born-blind man comes to Ward One to confirm whether their requirement about women will be met, the camera gives a close-up of the scalpel hanging on the cabinet, which actually moves forward the plot and serves as a strong and effective cue that the resistance is going to happen.

When the doctor's wife eventually gets annoyed and determines to resist, she picks up the scalpel and walks to the Ward Three. On the way, the lighting turns from dark to fluorescent, which serves as a cue that some changes will be brought about and the fates of these women or the people under the governance

of Ward Three will change.

Also, on the way to kill the chief of Ward Three, the depiction of the doctor's wife is in a low angle shot. The shift of shot angle further indicates the shifting of power, or signifies that she is not that weak anymore and the previous power frame is going to be challenged.

2.2.2 Characters' Lines

When the Ward Three requires valuable jewelry in the exchange of food, people in Ward One have no choice but to accept this harsh requirement. It seems that they have been accustomed to the discipline of power to ensure their survival. However, when they are encountering more ridiculous and cruel orders, they begin to think about refusing and resisting. A young girl argues in a resolute tone "I'm not go. I'm not go." And the direct questioning and disagreement "what are you talking about?", following a black man's question "any volunteers?" also shows the females' recognition that their interests and rights are being infringed and they find the necessity to break the power governance by Ward Three. That is to say, they begin to attempt to get rid of the discipline of power.

When they are walking in line to go to the Ward Three and preparing themselves for the exchange, the doctor's wife notices a girl's intention of running away, she calmly reminds "it is no use to run way. We have guards." It fully shows that under the close watch of power, it is uneasy for them to make resistance or challenges. However, such minor behavior further functions as a symbol indicating that a larger-scale and more comprehensive struggle is going to happen immediately.

2.2.3 Behaviour and Actions

When collecting the jewelry or any tools or devices that can be used to exchange food with the Ward Three, the doctor's wife accidentally gets a scalpel from a nurse. However, she does not hand on it like other valuable goods, instead, she hides this scalpel in her own pocket and hangs it on the cabinet, which suggests the beginning of her resistance plan and lays a foundation for her later resistance against the power.

After they are submitted to another requirement of Ward Three, their bodies get insulted by the men in Ward Three. Then, these women come back to Ward One and find a girl who does not conform to the orders in the process of intercourse has been killed. Several days later, the born-blind man comes to require the sacrifice of the women in Ward Two and on the way, he evilly greets the people in Ward One and insults these women with words again. Hearing this and knowing he will humiliate the women in Ward Two, the doctor's wife thinks she cannot tolerate anymore. She stops telling the fairy tale to the little boy; instead, quietly and alone, she picks up the scalpel and walks to Ward Three. When the men of Ward Three get immersed in the intercourse, she kills the chief with that scalpel without hesitation. This signifies a significant step in the resistance.

3. Conclusion

Based on Foucault's theory of power and discourse, the film *Blindness* is analyzed and explained in terms of its manifestation of and resistance against power in the wards. At the beginning, the patients in Ward One, including the doctor's wife, are submitted to the power frame constructed by the Ward Three and guards; however, after experiencing harsh treatment, the doctor's wife and other women recognize the significance of resistance. The process of resistance, however, is not always without a hitch. But what worth appreciating is that the female roles in the film, represented by the doctor's wife, have combined the quality of bravery and wisdom. Meanwhile, the role change and resistance of female roles in the film can bring much enlightenment to us in modern society.

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