

From Being Desired to Writing Freely--The Expression of Female Subjectivity in When a Woman Ascends the Stairs

Jiayi Li

Kingston University, KT1 2EE, UK

Abstract: By analyzing *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, this essay discusses how the film presents women as women, rather than women as spectacle, and explores how to write freely about women and how to realize de-eroticization and free expression of women. The ideal feminine figure does not exist in the male gaze, but the free soul of the woman herself. This essay is mainly discussed the expression of Female Subjectivity in *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*.

Keywords: Female Subjectivity; *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*; Women's Space

Introduction

The publication in 1973 of Claire Johnston's *Woman Cinema as Counter-Cinema*, a landmark paper in the development of early feminist film theory, argued that "despite the enormous emphasis placed on woman as spectacle in the cinema, woman as woman is largely absent." (Johnston, 1973)^[1] Women had long appeared as visual spectacles in cinema, and as early films and classic films were produced by male directors, women found it hard to avoid becoming an object of desire. It was only in the 1960s and 1970s that the cinema changed with the feminist trend and more male directors began to produce films about women. The Japanese director Mikio Naruse's film *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* (1960) is an excellent female film. In this film, the director puts himself in the position of women and tells the story of women's struggle for their dignity in modern Japanese society. By analyzing the film language and narrative of *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, this essay discusses how the film presents women as women, rather than women as spectacle, and explores how to write freely about women and how to realize de-eroticization and free expression of women.

1. Women's Narrative and Film Language in *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*

When a Woman Ascends the Stairs was filmed in the 1960s, right at the beginning of the feminist wave. In this era of the feminist movement, director Mikio Naruse chose the character of Ginza mama-san and the story of Ginza as his subject matter, and he chose to observe and write about women living in the cracks of modern urban Japan, which is itself a feminist point of view. *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* features Keiko, a 30-year-old woman, reflecting on the situation of traditional Japanese women who were forced to make a living in the Ginza bars to make ends meet and support their families after the defeat of the Second World War. Mikio Naruse embodies female empowerment through a narrative that is close to the women themselves. We can see that Mikio Naruse chooses a female point of view as the narrative's point of view, starting with the daily life of a mama-san in Ginza, Tokyo, and carefully describing Keiko's psychological state and portraying Keiko's character, all from Keiko's point of view. This is to make the woman the focus of the film's narrative. At the same time, all the relationships are developed from Keiko, portraying Keiko's relationship with her rival Lily, Keiko's relationship with her fling, Keiko's relationship with her bar customers, Keiko's relationship with her family, which is also a manifestation of the woman's own condition and her power, as the woman is now at the center of the relationships. In the traditional sense, Keiko's profession falls into the category of the porn industry, which is not socially acceptable in terms of morality. However, the film is free of value-based criticism and blame, and Mikio Naruse gives a feminine perspective of care for the women at the bottom. Naruse uses dialogue aspects to demonstrate different emotions and feelings portrayed by varying characters in the film. A good example is "Night fell. I hated climbing those stairs more than anything. But once I was up, I would take each day as it came." In *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, climbing up the stairs is both

symbolical and narrative.

As the audiovisual language of the film narrative, film language is embedded in the film text. The language of cinema contains the formal language and the narrative language. The formal language includes camera movement, cinematography and sound effects; and the narrative language includes story, characters, plot, etc. The language of cinema is a power of telling. One special storytelling technique that runs through the story form of Mikio Naruse's *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* is repetition. Mikio Naruse repeatedly tells the story through repetition, with the aim of portraying the characters. We can see that every day Keiko appears repeatedly outside the bar door, repeatedly ascends the narrow staircase, and then appears in front of the customers, dressed up and smiling politely at them out of habit. This repetition is unique. The repetition firstly reflects Keiko's daily routine of working day in and day out as a Ginza mama-san, then the helplessness with which Keiko must manage her daily life and work, keeping a balance between these two affairs, the helplessness of being trapped in the whirlwind of life. Everyday life flows like a river, and Keiko seems to be losing her years in this river, no longer young, caught up in the minutiae of everyday life. This reflects the character's inner exhaustion and the helplessness of life.

Another noteworthy aspect of the story form is the circular structure. Keiko spends her days entertaining and juggling her guests, and after she has finished her chores, big and small, inside and out, Keiko begins to walk up the narrow staircase to greet her guests again. This represents Keiko's return to the beginning of her life after many hardships and trials, and the need to keep up with her regular daily schedule, day in and day out, reflects a philosophy of living in the present. It is both a kind of helplessness and a salvation. It is a way of saving oneself from everyday life by doing every little thing right and gaining a sense of survival. This is the particular meaning of the structure of this circular story. Women, globally, are disadvantaged when it comes to work, labor, relationships, and family (Beard, 2011)^[2].

2. The non-eroticized representation of women in *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*

Claire Johnston, in her *Woman Cinema as Counter-Cinema*, claims "In the sexist ideological and male-dominated films, women are simply presented as what they are meant to represent to men." (Johnston, 1999)^[3]. Mikio Naruse has no pornographic representation of women in this film. Mikio Naruse writes about the modernity of Japanese women. As a male producer, he uses modern women as his subjects and modern urban life as his subject matter, delving into his subjects' living environments and writing about their living space and psychology. Mikio Naruse is known as 'the director who understands the situation of Japanese women and the nature of their plight'. (Yu, 2010)^[4] This documentary-style melodrama reflects Mikio Naruse's humanistic concern for women. What makes Mikio Naruse's films so moving is the emotional flow of the characters in the story. Mikio Naruse's films always show emotion, and his shots are organized around that emotion (Liang, 2008)^[5]. It is within a camera language that embodies emotion that Mikio Naruse writes about the female situation and the female psyche. This style breeds a faint poetic sorrow. This sadness is a reflection of Keiko's life as she is trapped in the life difficulties. Society expects those working in nightclubs to have a certain tolerance for alcohol, just like their customers. Keiko's customers sexually harass her by groping her body, ogling, and touching her hands continuously. Such actions frustrate her, but she cannot quit the job (Jackson, 2020)^[6]. Apparently, Keiko doesn't like his job, she stepped up the stairs alone to face the guests. Every step was her determination.

Mikio Naruse restores the noble side of Japanese women. He presents three types of screen women: self-respecting, self-love, and self-absorbed. These are the noble qualities of the modern Japanese women, and it is through his characterization and storyline that Mikio Naruse embodies these good qualities in his film. "Japanese women were disillusioned by the broken social promises of the Meiji Restoration and the occupation of democracy. Still, they were also hopeful for many things: strength, energy, foresight, and their own dignity." (Hutchinson, 2009)^[7] Despite the limitations of Naruse Mikio's writing, he writes about the most modern aspect of Japanese women, self-esteem, self-reliance, lack of dependence on men, lack of subservience to men, and wonderfulness of such a life. Despite the trials and tribulations, it is not an unpleasant life, but a healthy and bright one in which they take responsibility for themselves. Laura Mulvey points out that classic Hollywood films always encode women erotically as visual objects, as objects to be objectified and viewed (Mulvey, 1975)^[8]. *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, however, does not put Keiko into an erotic encoding, but instead amplifies Keiko's quest for personal dignity, which is a more serious point of the film.

Laura Mulvey identifies three erotic narratives of women in cinema – fetishistic, self-possessed, and voyeuristic – mostly found in the classic films of an earlier period. They were made by male producers and aimed at a male audience. As a result, these films are full of the male gaze, where men watch women and see them as objects of desire in their way, creating an erotic way of viewing and narrative. In contrast to these films, Mikio Naruse's *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* is a non-eroticized narrative. Although

the film is also male-dominated, it does not treat women as objects of desire. One could argue that this is due to the director's choice of female subject matter, or that the director has given the women in the film qualities that make the characters come alive and spill out of life. Still, one fundamental reason is that the film's non-erotic narrative is due to a female subjective point of view. The film presents Ginza's life as seen through the eyes of Ginza's mama-san Keiko, who is the one who deals with all matters, large and small. Keiko's point of view is the main point of view of the film. Thus, although the film uses a third-person narrative, Keiko remains a major narrative focus. The film's non-eroticized narrative reflects the value of the female subject. The non-eroticized narrative does not treat women as objects of desire, but is willing to look at their situation, listen to their voices, and highlight their value and meaning as human beings.

Molly Haskell claims "in the 1950s, in the caricature of the 'sexy woman' and the 'good girl', the 'whore-virgin' dichotomy dominated with great force on the one hand." (Haskell, 2016)^[9] We can see that in the early films, the image of women was presented as monolithic, with women being either sexy or good girls. In addition to the stereotypical portrayal of women, female characters also faced being mystified. However, non-eroticized narratives require directors and scriptwriters to demystify women. Only when women are no longer mystified can they be truly liberated and their image is a free expression of their own situation.

3. Women's Space and Self-Writing in *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*

Keiko's bar is a space where women can negotiate with men. As a game space between women and men, bars are presented in many works of art. The bar, as a space where men dominate the discourse, is the embodiment of a masculine symbolic order. A masterpiece by the Impressionist Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882)^[10], and *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* share the same object – the barmaid/chaperone. They are an essential element of the bar, a means of attracting male customers to the bar. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* depicts a frontal portrait of a barmaid – she is facing the viewer, standing at the bar of a liquor cabinet, with a mirror behind her, reflecting the variety of customers in the bar. The work is interesting in that the way the woman stands shows her trapped inside the bar, she is lethargic, and the customers in the mirror behind her create visual oppression. This reflects the fact that the barmaid is oppressed in the space of the bar. She appears very small and powerless and does not reflect the power of women in any way. The louder the bar, the weaker the barmaid becomes. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is a reflection of the barroom as a space for women, where women are very much inferior. It is a traditional hierarchical structure in the bar. Keiko's barroom in the film is not quite the same. Bars are somewhat more intimate than the usual urban public spaces... Bars represent a form of male power. Bar patrons are basically men, and as long as they pay, these waitresses and even mama-san, like Keiko, are expected to serve them. (Kou, 2021)^[11] The value of women here is determined by their appearance and popularity; the deciders are all men, and women are subordinate to men. But in such a situation, Keiko still refuses to spend the night with the customers, gaining space in the game with them and raising her status, which reflects Keiko's dignity as a woman. It is clear that the bar does not belong to women, but is only a space to play with competitors and customers, yet through Keiko's efforts, she makes it a space to negotiate with men.

The bar as a closed space is a place where interests are contested and women must wear a mask to survive. Keiko's mask is her smile. She uses her smile to attract customers, she uses it to subtly turn them away and she uses it to approach customers she likes. Smiling is Keiko's means of survival. As such, the smile becomes an important identifier of the character. It is a critical way of expressing characterisation. As soon as she enters the bar, Keiko puts on a smile, a sign of Keiko's professionalism and her helplessness as a Ginza escort. The smile gives the character a complex dimension and reflects the psychological complexity of the character.

The staircase is symbolic of the space in which women live, and as a recurring space, the staircase is given different connotations. David Bordwell writes: "Narrative is richer in meaning than the camera; film space is also broader than the role of orientation. Therefore, we must not imagine the spectator as a literary or metaphorical point of reflection of perspective, but rather approach the interpretation of space dynamically." (Bordwell, 1999)^[12] The staircase in the film also holds different, dynamic meanings on different levels. The staircase is the passage that connects the outside of the bar to the inside of the bar, and we can see the staircase as Keiko's space of preparation. In this space, Keiko gathers her clothes, gathers her emotions, leaves behind the unpleasantness of the previous day and faces the new day's customers in a good frame of mind. The staircase provides Keiko with an occasion to relax for a while.

Faced with the dilemma of life's in and out, Keiko temporarily gets a chance to hide in the stairwell. The space-time of the staircase is a kind of pause, suspending the difficulties of life, and this pause also gives Keiko a chance to relax. At the same time, the staircase serves as a space for Keiko to confront. A narrow staircase, Keiko picks up the steps and walks with determination into the bar. No matter what yesterday was like, today, Keiko still has to face. The stairs are in this sense also imbued with Keiko's determined,

positive qualities, acting as a symbol of Keiko's spirit.

4. The Expression of Female Subjectivity in When a Woman Ascends the Stairs

Female subjectivity is, from a Marxist point of view, a kind of subjective initiative. It is through Keiko's subjectivity that her subjectivity is expressed in the film. Despite the many distracting chores she encounters and the daily struggle to pay the bills, Keiko keeps herself clean and makes her way in the treacherous environment of Ginza. The so-called female subjectivity is a kind of affirmation of women's own strength and ability, a clear recognition by women of their own strengths as subjects, and a conscious demand for their own continuous improvement and perfection in terms of status, ability, lifestyle, knowledge, personality building, and psychological health, etc. It is a kind of conscious motivation that is reflected in the practical activities of social life. (Zhao, 2004)^[13] Simone de Beauvoir says: "The subject is both intersubjective and socially constructed." (Beauvoir, 2015) Keiko's subjectivity is also embodied in social construction. It is in the complex layers of social relations that Keiko uses her wisdom and restraint to manoeuvre among her various guests, maintaining a proper distance from the male guests and becoming herself rather than one of the many self-indulgent chaperones of Ginza. Should the spatial dimension be included in the construction of feminist theory, combining the construction of female subject identity with specific spaces such as geographical space, social space, textual space, body space and psychological space? (Cheng, 2011)^[14] While we explore Keiko's subjectivity, we can also analyze Keiko's psychological space at the same time. The staircase described above is a reflection of Keiko's psychological space. Keiko's psychological space is rich in dimensions. On the one hand, Keiko is surrounded by the customers of the Ginza bar; on the other hand, Keiko wants to save money to open a bar, and she always wants to be independent. But we can also see that Keiko is not isolated from the world, she helps her colleagues and contributes to the support of her family, which is a reflection of the richness of Keiko's heart.

The value of Keiko's life is euphemistically expressed in *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*. It is in her weighing of judgments that Keiko's value of life is manifested. Keiko's unique value in life is the fact that she works as an escort in a profession that is considered lowly by society, but instead of giving up on herself, she works hard and lives hard. Keiko's days are considered dark as she tries to make ends meet for her family day in and day out, but Keiko's inner strength and unrelenting commitment to herself is the inner dignity of Keiko's solitary life, which shows us the value of her life. "It is only when women not only see themselves as women, determine their own essence, the meaning of their lives and their place in society, but also look at the outside world from a female perspective and understand and grasp it in a way that gives it a feminine life character, as 'generative beings'. It is only when the modern woman establishes her identity as a historical subject." (Zhang, 2003)^[15] Modern women are not subordinate to men, and in the 1960s, in the rapidly developing Japanese society, ordinary middle-class women had to survive in the cracks. Even so, we can see Keiko's light through Mikio Naruse's expression of female subjectivity, which is a moving aspect of Keiko's establishment as a female figure.

5. From being desired to writing freely – the way of the de-sexualization of feminist cinema

Only by distancing themselves from men can women distance themselves from the male order and truly become women themselves. If women do not distance themselves from men, they can easily become subordinate to men and become objects of male desire. In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Laura Mulvey analyses how women become objects of eroticized male viewing. She writes: "In a world dominated by gender inequality, the pleasure of looking has split into two aspects: the active/masculine and the passive/feminine. The decisive male's gaze projects the fantasies onto images of women typified according to their needs." (Mulvey, 1981)^[16] In a male world, women face a situation of misrecognition by men, and women as objects of desire are always in danger of being typecast. In early film theory, the early stages of femininity criticism, women existed as the polar opposite of saints or demons. How can the female figure escape this typecasting? One direction is desexualization. Desexualization means removing the excessive pretensions of sexualized sexuality and restoring the human being to her own body, giving her the beauty of her own body – the removal of unnatural grooming techniques and exaggerated expressions. An example is the famous film star, Marilyn Monroe. Her body was shaped by plastic surgery. Her smile was the result of countless hours of practice in front of the mirror, her appearance had to be trimmed with fancy clothes and her body had to be slimmed to show off her curves, all of which were artificial means of expression, and created an image that felt unreal and unfree. Monroe is the quintessential presence as an eroticized object of male viewing. The other opposite direction, desexualization, is a path to freedom. Desexualization is a way of liberating women to a great extent, freeing them from the aesthetic oppression imposed on them by men and allowing them to truly accept themselves and release their charms.

6. Conclusion

By analyzing *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*, this essay discusses how the film presents women as women, rather than women as spectacle, and explores how to write freely about women and how to realize de-eroticization and free expression of women. The ideal feminine figure does not exist in the male gaze, but the free soul of the woman herself. The freedom of the female body is first and foremost liberated from the male gaze and not subordinated to hedonism and expectations. Eroticism is not limited to gender; the natural body is desexualized. A naked, provocative body can bring visual pleasure. Also, a natural, comfortable body can bring visual pleasure. Pornography creates anxiety; desexualisation dissolves it. The erotic body creates pleasure and the relaxed body creates beauty. Although *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs* does not present the body as comfortable, and “the body” is not the film’s subject, it is also de-eroticized. We can expect films about free women, perhaps as a first step, films about women’s comfortable bodies, and films about women’s free spirituality. Moving from being desired to writing freely requires more good works like *When a Woman Ascends the Stairs*.

References:

- [1] Beauvoir, S. D. (2015). *The second sex*. London: Vintage Classic.
- [2] Bordwell, D. (1992). *Film Space of All Kinds*. Literature and art research.1992(01). <https://wh.cnki.net/article/detail/WYY-J199201020?album=V>
- [3] Chen, L. (2011). “After Beauvoir: Criticism of Female Subjectivity in the Contemporary Female Criticism Theory.” *Social Sciences of Ningxia*, 2011, vol.1, pp. 37-140.
- [4] Haskell, M. (1987). *From Reverence to rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- [5] Jackson, E. (2020). “Melodrama Interrupted: Kawashima Yuzo’s Interventions in Genre and Gender.” *Literary and Cultural Studies*, September 2020(46.2), pp. 161-193.
- [6] Johnston, Claire. (1973). “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema.” in Claire Johnston, ed., *Notes on Women’s Cinema*. London: SEFT, 1973, pp. 24–31.
- [7] Kou, W (2022). “The Spatial Narration of Mikio Naruse’s Films in Feminist Perspective.” *Journal of Gansu High School*. 2022, v.27(03).
- [8] Liang, A. (2008). *The Emotional Flow Montage of Mikio Naruse*. *Xinwen Aihaozhe*, 2022(05), pp. 46-47. <https://www.cnki.com.cn/Article/CJFDTotat-XWAZ200805028.htm>
- [9] Mulvey, L. (1975). “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In *Visual and Other Pleasures* by Laura Mulvey, pp. 6-18. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- [10] Mulvey, L. (1981). “After thoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’.” In *The Film Theory Reader: Debates and Arguments* edited by Marc Furstenau. London: Routledge.
- [11] Naruse, M. (2011). “When a Woman Ascends the Stairs.” In Dave Kehr, ed. *When Movies Mattered: Reviews from a Transformative Decade*, pp. 234-237. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226429427-051>
- [12] Russell, C. (2008). *The Cinema of Naruse Mikio: Women and Japanese Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- [13] Tan, H. and Song, J. (2020). “A Study of Laura Mulvey’s Closed Anti-narrative on carnival Ceremony.” *Shandong Social Science*, (03), pp. 90-96.
- [14] Yu, L. (2010). “Screen women who face the plight of reality: The Women image in Mikio Naruse’s Movies.” *Contemporary Cinema*, (02), pp.138-140.
- [15] Zhao, X. (2004). “Female Subjectivity: A New Interpretation of the Marxist View of Women.” *Collection of Women Studies*, (04), pp. 10-15, 60.
- [16] Zhang, G. (2003). *Reconstruct Women’s subjectivity: A Theory of Post-modern feminism*. *Journal of Hunan University (Social Sciences Edition)*, (04), pp. 89-92.