The waning of vision's hegemony: A phenomenological perspective on mother-daughter discord in patriarchal societies

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ABSTRACT: If phenomenology is a research methodology uniquely positioned to enable us to learn from others, I aim to demonstrate the idea that cinema is a privileged site from which to investigate the notion of virtuality (sight and reality), even in an age where vision's predominance is waning. In order to do so, I consider the painfully disruptive mother-daughter relationship found cross-culturally and discourse-analytically in contemporary patriarchal societies. This bond is arguably of central concern to feminists (and women in general) since previous research has found that the fractious nature of this dynamic points to a very specific psychological deformation of the female psyche under conditions of sexist oppression. The views of French psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva and other feminist contributors to the debate on this psychological construct are considered. The possibility of a cultural remedy inspired by a secularised trend of Chinese Buddhism in post-Maoist China, a society very different from that of the West, is investigated. This will involve the analysis of the film *Curse of the Golden Flower* (Chinese Mandarin soundtrack and English subtitles). I subsequently explore whether or not a valuable model for the compromised mother/daughter relationship is available within the context of the notion of a "slave economy" in the comparatively healthier mother/son relationship of (contemporary) Han Chinese culture. By means of cross-cultural analysis as research tool, this article finds confirmation for the proposition of a positive mother/daughter dynamic in the French novelist Colette's relationship with her mother, Sido. In conclusion, I find that cinema (as an art form serving the eye, i.e. virtuality) is particularly well suited as a site to investigate psychological phenomena by way of interpretative phenomenology as a research methodology, even as vision – as the human sense of choice – has begun to wane amid a global crisis in masculinity.

KEYWORDS: fractured, Han Chinese culture, mother-daughter relationship, patriarchy, technology of sight (cinema), virtuality

Introduction

What is the relation between virtuality and phenomenology? In what ways may traditional phenomenological thought be redeployed to gain insight into virtuality (a conflation of reality and sight)? In this contribution I aim to demonstrate the proposition that if phenomenology is particularly suited to "describe the basic structures of human experience and understanding from a first-person perspective" (Carman, 2002, p. viii), then the individual's encounter with virtuality by way of technology of sight (the medium of cinema) is a privileged site to examine psychological phenomena. In an attempt to learn from the Chinese, I investigate the possibility of a curative discourse to assuage the damaged mother-daughter bond in patriarchy by way of a cross-cultural analysis from an interpretative phenomenological perspective.

Perhaps no issue is arguably of such central concern to feminists (and women in general) as that of the painfully disruptive mother-daughter relationship found in contemporary patriarchal societies. It is worth stressing – as argued by

Eichenbaum and Orbach (1988) – that this is a feature peculiar to patriarchy, which would include socialist societies such as contemporary China (the People's Republic of China [PRC]). For this reason, among others, traditional psychoanalytic approaches might contribute precious little to an understanding of the forces that drive female oppression under these conditions (Nairne & Smith, 1984; Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006). Consider, for example, Dana Jack's (1993, p. 14) suggestion that the issue of depression among women in the West turns on "the fundamental patterning of gender on consciousness and behavior".

After exploring the parameters of the problem in an overview of Western, largely feminist literature (although the issue is also noted in the literatures of Far Eastern cultures under conditions of patriarchal oppression), I seek to find a model for a curative dialogue in the far healthier mother-son relationship as it originated in Chinese Buddhism and became secularised in Chinese Han culture. My method is discourse analysis.

After a brief consideration of film theory insofar as it relates to mother (as "other") ensconced on the screen, or cinema as haunted by mother, I analyse one film by the critically acclaimed Zhang Yimou, namely *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006; Chinese

Mandarin soundtrack and English subtitles). This production stars Gong Li (as the mother Empress), a Chinese actress well known in the West (Zhang, 1999). I chose cinema as my forum of investigation because of the documented, submerged maternal discourse that haunts the silver screen. This is the result of the dearth in maternal discourse so prevalent in patriarchal societies, but it also allows for a phenomenal unfolding of the experience across the entire group, namely women as an oppressed group. From a cross-cultural perspective, I test this model of the mother/son relationship entrenched in Han culture against the outline of a good mother/daughter bond in the West. I refer to the well-documented and famous twentieth century French novelist Colette's relationship with her mother, Sido.

Finally, I argue that cinema as an art form serving the eye is particularly well suited as a site to investigate virtuality (notably psychological phenomena as a case in point), even as its importance as a sense of choice has started to wane, by way of interpretative phenomenology as a research methodology.

Problem

On the cusp of the twenty-first century, virtuality is an important aspect of the lifeworld of humans since we are, more so than most other animals, reliant on sight as our sense of choice, which is almost certainly the result of our upright posture (Freud, 1968c). By comparison, other mammals such as moles prefer smell over sight, while bats, dolphins and whales rely on echo-location. The general anti-logocentric and anti-ocular drive found in twentieth century French philosophy (Flynn, 1993) has resulted, at least in part, in an embracing of media technologies (the internet, film) encompassing both sound and sight, especially among younger people (Olivier, 2002) and the move away from paper books (Levin, 1993). Curiously, Linda Williams (1995, p. 36) argues that the "rupture of the dematerialized, decorporealised, unified centred vision of a theatrical scene and the plunging of the observer's own body into a transparent immediacy of eroticized self-presence" is observable in a splurge of pornography which has flooded the European scene since the late nineteenth century. Her point is that vision's pre-eminence has had to make place for sharing centre stage with other human senses, notably hearing.

While the age of sight has not yet run its course, I argue that the availability of cinematic images in a full-blown "screen culture" (Marchetti, 2006, p. 5) serves an important role in phenomenological investigations, particularly psychological phenomena such as the mother-daughter bond in patriarchy. In this respect, the words of Carol Gilligan (quoted in Apter, 2004, p. 224; original text not available to me) will resonate with many women from different generations: "anger between mothers and daughters are [sic] legendary; the love is often held in silence".

Consider how frequently women novelists like Doris Lessing attempt to exorcise their mothers through their writing. In the words of Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach (1988, p. 80), two British psychologists with many years' experience in counselling women suffering from depression, "[m]any women never feel free of their mothers. They are not separate people, but experience mother as living inside, judging, binding, tempting, and disappointing". This could be part of the reason why women are twice as likely as men to suffer from depression (Nairne & Smith, 1984; Elliot, 1991; Jack, 1993). As American psychoanalyst and academic Phyllis Chesler (2009)

points out, this mother-daughter "bond" is in fact pivotal to a woman's relationship to every other woman she engages with in the course of her life. This observation is analogous to this contribution's later discussion of a female "slave culture". Based on anthropological fieldwork done in a Chinese society (Taiwan), Margery Wolf (1972) suggests that "uterine power" revolves around the mother's reproductive abilities (power emanating from the womb) and the vital task of delivering a son, since a good relationship with a son will gain her an important ally in a hostile new familial environment.

Psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva also weighed in on the debate surrounding women's depression, and argues that abjection – a term she coined to explain the process of becoming an individual for one's child after birth – is different for girls than for boys and would necessarily lead to psychic difficulties for the former:

> For man and for woman, the loss of the mother is biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the *sine qua non* of our individuation...For a woman, whose specular identification with the mother as well as the introjection of the maternal body and self are more immediate, such an inversion of the matricidal drive into a death-bearing maternal image is more difficult if not impossible... There is no hatred, only an implosive mood that walls itself in and kills me secretly, very slowly, through permanent bitterness, bouts of sadness, even lethal sleeping pills that I take in smaller or greater quantities in the dark hope of meeting... (Kristeva, 2002b, pp. 197–198).

As women of necessity identify with this same body which they now also need to abject, according to Kristeva, this tension is a major cause of clinical depression in women. Consider her views in the light of what Juliet Mitchell (1984, p. 300) has called the "fundamental human repudiation of femininity".

With this in mind, previous research (notably that of Eichenbaum and Orbach, 1988) has found that this fractured relationship dynamic is peculiar to patriarchal societies across the globe, as it is symptomatic of a very specific deformation of the female psyche under conditions of male oppression. Patriarchy is defined by Gerda Lerner (1986, p. 29), in general terms, as

> the manifestation and institutionalization of male dominance over women and children in the family and the extension of male dominance over women in society in general. It implies that men hold power in all the important institutions of society and that women are deprived of access to such power. It does not imply that women are either totally powerless or totally deprived of rights, influences or resources.

According to this definition, men have conquered and occupied all points of power and, from this position of vantage, dominate women in society. In a feminist examination of the compromised female psyche under patriarchy, Eichenbaum and Orbach argue that girls are brought up to put others' happiness first, and that this results in many adult women internally manifesting an unresolved, needy child version of themselves. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1988, p. 57; emphasis added) explain this problem in the following striking way:

Psychological attachment and lack of separation between mothers and daughters and daughters and mothers continue through generations of women. The daughter becomes involved in a cycle that is part of each woman's experience: attempting to care for mother. As the daughter learns her role as nurturer, *her first child is her mother.*

This child can subsequently never grow up as she has to prioritise the needs of others. Such a girl-within-the-woman phenomenon is further compounded by a "push-pull" dynamic, where the mother aims to empower her daughter but at the same time resents her opportunities as that which she never had herself (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1988).

Feminists refer to one complication of this scenario as the "Daddy's Girl" syndrome (Würtzel, 2006), in which some women believe they are an exception to the misogynistic rule. Similarly, Freud's well-known observation that, whereas a woman looks for a husband that resembles her father, it is the troubled relationship with her m/other that she reproduces in her relationship with her husband, comes to mind.

Another way in which women's psychic health is disadvantaged in patriarchy is as a result of the so-called "negative Oedipal complex". Jeanne Lampl-de Groot (quoted in Stanton, 1992, p. 275; original text not available to me) coined this term to explain the sexual and psychological development of young girls, as their trajectory has been found to be different from that of boys. As I suggested above, girls do not separate from their mothers as successfully as boys do, and therefore continue to long for their m/other during the so-called parallel "Oedipal period". I argue that our understanding of the mother-daughter relationship has changed considerably with a feminist appreciation of the negative Oedipus complex. In the words of Chodorow (1987, p. 140, cited in Stanton, 1992, p. 275), "[g]irls do not reject their mother and women [in general] in favour of father and men, but remain in a bisexual triangle throughout childhood into puberty".

Whereas boys (who benefit from the heterosexual Oedipus complex) are able to separate from their mothers without too much stress (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1988), girls are generally unable to establish psychic boundaries with their mothers, and therefore remain in a psychic continuum with them until death (ibid.). This is, however, not the case in traditional Chinese culture, as girls were expected to leave their family homes to join that of their husbands, which necessarily led to a definitive separation from their mothers (Mann, 1997).

I argue that Kristeva is partially correct with her argument that abjection is the cause of women's depression in the West. Her position must be understood within the context of the "negative Oedipus complex" (the girl's continued longing for her mother during her formative years) as well as her inability to separate on a psychic level from her primary caregiver (understood to be the mother) in a patriarchal society where a so-called "push-pull" dynamic dominates the relationship. In view of the dearth of healthy discourse surrounding motherhood in the West (Kaplan, 1983; Kristeva, 1986; 1987; 2002a), Kristeva suggested in the closing pages of her book *About Chinese Women* (1991) that although the position of women in China remains problematic even under a socialist dispensation, a curative discourse might be found in premodern Chinese society. Now I turn to a consideration of discourse analysis as methodology.

Discourse analysis as phenomenological method

In selecting hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology as my methodology, I am in full agreement with Hammersley (2000) that, in contrast to positivists, the researcher cannot neutralise her or his biases but should, instead, make these explicit (Mouton & Marais, 1990). By utilising phenomenology to unearth a possible healing discourse on the fractious mother-daughter bond, combined with the advantages which cross-cultural analysis has over rival research tools, I hope to deliver a tangible result regarding this serious issue in female psychology under conditions of patriarchy. Cross-cultural analysis has an ability to shed light on a cultural oversight or blind spot in the home culture (Martin, 1989; Thaku, 1997).

Phenomenology has been defined as

an approach to research that seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon by exploring it from the perspective of those who have experienced it [and] the goal of phenomenology is to describe the meaning of this experience – both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019, p. 91).

In this regard, Michel Foucault has highlighted the use of discourse as a tool to investigate social relations. Discourse marks the juncture of language, power and knowledge. It is "meant to defuse the distinction between ideas and practices or text and world that the [overarching] culture concept too readily encourages" (Abu Lughod, as quoted in Yanagisako & Delaney, 1992, pp. 15–16). She argues that Foucauldian discursive constructions have an advantage over the poverty of texts "in themselves" to bring about progressive change in the world. Foucault's view is that discourses shape each other, forming institutions and producing subjects as well as knowledge which supports their making.

I will use the ideas of both Foucault and Lacan to explain the notions of discourse and discourse formation. Bert Olivier (2011) suggests that Foucault's exposition of how discourse is regulated by different rules meant to support and reinforce each other, in different contexts, in the dispersion of power throughout society, is very revealing. Similarly, Olivier (2012) commends a Lacanian exposition of the four discourse types, enumerated below, for its conceptual clarity in explaining the constitution of gendered subjectivity and the differences and inter-relationships between the various discourse models.

I will attempt to establish a link between knowledge, power and discourse, before defining discourse analysis, which will serve as my methodology in this contribution. Lacan (2007) suggests that discourse has a "naturalising" effect where distinct psychic formatting takes shape, and he recognises four discourse types. On the one hand, the master's discourse represents the induction of the subject to reality by her/his acquisition of language accompanied by "eliminating" elements detrimental to normalisation suppressed into the realm of the unconscious. The master's discourse has been compared to it as being "analogous to film editing where miles of reel are synchronized into a systematic and coherent narrative which skims over inconsistencies and alternative versions from that of the dominant perspective, exiled to the unconscious" (Lötter, 2014, p. 49). The discourse of the university has a complementary role to that of the master's discourse, namely finding the

knowledge to support the master's claims to credibility. The university discourse is therefore a slave to the master.

The discourses of the hysteric and the analyst, on the other hand, call into question the justification for the slice of reality proffered up for consumption by the discourses of the master and the university. Questioning the notion of knowledge as modelled on the enlightenment ideal of "objective truth", as suggested by the master and his slave, puts forward a construct on ideological grounds to bolster the privileges and claims of neo-liberal patriarchy. The hysteric and the analyst are positioned to critique the "cracks" in the sanctioned version provided by the first two discourses.

The discourse of the hysteric interrogating the master's discourse (and that of his slave) is made possible by the analyst's mediating role, since the subject may recognise new paths open to her/his life's trajectory previously thought unattainable because the avenues previously suggested by the master are no longer regarded as being unshakeable and absolute. This permits the hysteric, guided by the analyst, to interrogate each of these options in succession.

In his inaugural lecture, Foucault (1972) outlined the rules (which are further subdivided into more rules) which allow discourses to take root and circulate throughout society. The three main rules for the "control" of discourse are exclusion, internal control and conditions of deployment. Power is reproduced into different discursive formations and the interaction between the different networks of discursive operations shows how the various rules support and reinforce each other in different contexts in the same manner in which power is dispersed in society. In the context of the production of the discourse on femininity, I argue that it turns on the absence of a satisfactory discourse on "m/otherhood" (a term for which we are indebted to Jane Flax [1996]). This absence, within the framework of the proliferation of a number of conflicting discourses on "femininity", serves neo-liberal patriarchal interests. Little wonder that Leslie Rabine (1991, p. 880) refers to women in the contemporary world as experiencing "madly, disarticulated, schizophrenic lives".

Both Lacan and Foucault have added to our understanding of how the formation of subjectivity is the outcome of discursive movements. The question arises as to how discourse could be analysed cross-culturally to assist us in constructing a curative discourse on a problem, namely the damaged mother-daughter bond noted above that occurs globally in all patriarchal societies.

John Heritage (2006) defines critical discourse analysis as a technique to understand a phenomenon in its social context, whether in terms of class, gender or race, reproduced by the prevailing power structures and the ideology which inform it. I propose to use critical discourse analysis as my method to dissect the mother-son relationship in Chinese Han culture.

Why China? Since culture condenses oppressive and contradictory discourses into a regularising, apparently cohesive social structure (Yanagisako & Delaney, 1992), the task of a cross-cultural reading is to show up the "cultural production" of "normality", as I propose to do in this contribution. Since phenomenology is a methodology particularly suited to learning from others, I consider the notion of a female slave culture in patriarchy next.

Slave economy

Germaine Greer (1971), the well-known Australian feminist, argues that women have no idea how much men hate them. That men hate women can be considered at face value to be a true statement since we live in a misogynistic society, fed by a global patriarchal culture, but as with all generalisations, it overlooks the wisdom embedded in a more nuanced view.

At a time when gender-based violence (GBV) has become almost commonplace in our culture, it is not often acknowledged how cruel women can be to one another. Even though President Cyril Ramaphosa recently allocated R1.6 billion to implement an emergency plan to combat GBV (Chothia, 2020), this is not an effective remedy unless we understand the why and the how of this phenomenon that is peculiar to patriarchy.

The violence displayed in women's behaviour towards one another exposes a dimension of gender-based violence which is uncomfortable, even shameful to confront, in patriarchal culture. Susan Brownmiller (1976, p. 157) argues convincingly that "[i]t is consistent with the nature of oppression that within an oppressed group, men abuse women". Kenneth M. Stampp (quoted in Brownmiller, 1976, p. 157; original text not available to me), an expert on slavery, has lent support for Brownmiller's position suggesting that the conditions of slaves in the American deep South amounted to "[h]aving to submit to the superior power of their masters, [and] many slaves were extremely aggressive toward each other". Consider also Fanon's notion of "horizontal violence" among colonised people. Female subculture in patriarchy is but one example of this phenomenon. In Quentin Tarantino's (2012) excellent film *Django Unchained*, it is the slave overseer Stephen (Samuel L. Jackson), himself a slave on the cotton plantation Candyland, who treats other slaves with a total lack of empathy. His line of utter astonishment "Who this nigger up on that nag?" haunts the viewer long after the film has ended.

Chesler (2009, p. 174) explores this phenomenon of the slave economy of females in patriarchy and concludes that the cruel, harsh world of back-biting females makes many women desperate for a "saviour on a white horse" to rescue them from this inhumane hell. Chesler (ibid.) contends that women dream of "princes so as to be rescued from the cruel and arbitrary rule of an all-female world in which women replace and are themselves replaced by other women". Perhaps this is part of the reason why heterosexual marriage is so attractive to a great many women. In China and India, for example, the two most populous countries on the cusp of the 21st century and both with unadulterated patriarchal cultures, wedding planning is a very profitable industry.

Popular culture is saturated with depictions of the cruel machinations of women against women, such as in Margaret Atwood's disturbing novel *Cat's Eye* (shortlisted for the 1989 Booker Prize) and Zhang's film *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991). This vicious cycle of violence is a symptom of patriarchy and the toxically coercive nuclear family, as indicted above. Yet the stereotyping of women as caring, soft-hearted mothers is also a dangerous ideological construct, as women have a right to their faults.

The reason for these dichotomous apparatuses is that it serves a powerful ideological purpose in upholding gender performativity, i.e. that women are "naturally" nurturing caregivers, each with enough compassion and love to save the

whole world, which pairs with the patriarchal expectation for the man to be the rugged "provider", the archetypical hunter-gatherer. Both are conflations of gendered sociopolitical roles with supposed biological roles.

As a patriarchal slave economy hinges on the role of the m/other as the centre of the daughter's socialisation, I will now explore cinema as a privileged site for the study of maternal discourse.

Film theory as it impacts the m/other

From a phenomenological perspective, film allows us special access to the virtual, and therefore potentially affords unique psychological investigation. My choice of cinema as this contribution's medium of investigation is also partly motivated by Žižek's (2008) and Kracauer's (1969) celebrations of lost causes and the imperative to confront and fulfil these lest they continue to haunt us. For our purposes, the pertinent example is the paucity of healthy discourse on m/otherhood (Kristeva, 1982; 1986; Kaplan, 1983). The aforementioned sentiment is known as "the [symptomatic] return of the repressed" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973). Notable for this discussion is how the ghost of the neglected m/other is depicted as almost omnipresent in many narrative cinematic genres.

Why use narrative film as opposed to, for example, documentary? According to Naomi Wolf (1997), a storyline has an uncanny ability to reveal intimate or personal secrets. Lacan (as reported by Stoltzfus, 1996) explains this idea admirably in his famous expression that the unconscious speaks like a language (represented by lapses, inconsistencies and distortions in any text) which could be translated as suggesting that if repression is the price we pay for the comforts of society (Freud, 1968c), our engagement with literature or art is a novel way to rendezvous with the lost, abject figure of the m/other.

To demonstrate the idea that the repressed m/other hovers under the surface of most cinematic genres, I note several psychoanalytic concepts (namely fetish, voyeurism and scopophilia) which are necessary tools for a psychoanalytical reading of cinema. According to Freud (1968b), a fetish is a male attempt to deny his fear of castration. This is achieved when the heterosexual male observes the lack of the penis in the naked female form. To manage or assuage this fear, he needs to hold onto an emotional "prop" or support (an inanimate object such as a shoe) for sexual satisfaction which he associates with the assumed "lack" of a penis in the female body. E. Ann Kaplan (1983) explains scopophilia and voyeurism as men's enjoyment of the pleasure of observing others making love or watching the primal scene. This might be translated into a stroking of the penis and peeping through the keyhole (graphically represented by the camera). Men's irrational fear of women, explored below, is the motor driving the need to eroticise the female figure as a stand-in penis doubling as a coping mechanism to manage the dread experienced (Kaplan, 1983). This feverish hunting for the penis represented by the female body operates as a fetish. These ideas tie in well with Lucy Fischer's (1996) thesis that a sunken metaphor of the mother is observable in many filmic genres, and I turn to exploring this theme.

Fischer (1996, p. 9) argues that "a submerged association between genre reception and motherhood is to be found in a critical discourse that positions the film consumer as an anxious, insecure child". Science fiction films, such as *Terminator* (1984)

and *Back to the Future* (1985), hark back to the notion of time travel and the discovery of the "primal scene" where the child walks in on the mother engaging in sex. It is representative of a childhood obsession with her (Penley, 1989), while in horror movies such as *The Brood* (1979) and *Psycho* (1960) – featuring themes such as "monster birthing" and "dismembering moms" respectively – the idea which informs these productions is mother's guilt for the child's faulty upbringing (Fischer, 1996). By the same token, melodrama requires an effeminate male as its iconic centrepiece (ibid.).

Apart from the mother making her presence felt in these specific genres, her submerged metaphor is also unmistakably observable on a visceral level in cinematic productions. Robert Eberwein (1984, p. 42) contends that close-ups (notably the face; Cook, 1990) triggers our earliest memory of that "archetypal mass we can recall only dimly...The face in the close-up is, in essence, the mother's face, the breast, the primal unity of infancy". In an interview, Raymond Bellour (cited in Fischer, 1996) notes that narrative film (a successor to the novel which fulfilled the same role in the nineteenth century) exploits the Oedipal fantasy of the viewer's (and, for that matter, the hero's) prohibited desire for his m/other. Obviously, this desire demands redirection away from the m/other towards another woman or women. Teresa de Laurentis (1984) has built on Bellour's notion of the hero's motives in contending that the female presence in the narrative presents a riddle which the hero is meant to solve and his "victory" over the dark forces always hinges on destruction of the womb.

For Laura Mulvey (1989), women as cinematic icons (e.g. Charlize Theron, Gong Li, Marlene Dietrich) are fetish drivers. Note how extensive make-up and costume design shadow the female icon. Since the fetish (which stands in for the m/other) comforts the male spectator over his so-called "lack", Mulvey positions the male cinematic consumer as a small insecure boy trying to manage his dread of the all-powerful image of mother by either fetishising over her or being a voyeur spying on her through the keyhole (represented by either the camera or the screen). The image of the female icon on the screen "evinces certain deep-seated male anxieties concerning the *female's power over him*" (Fischer, 1996, p. 42; emphasis in the original). Gaylin Studlar (1985) has built on Mulvey's insights by proposing that the spectator relives a pre-oedipal moment (before the acquisition of language and at a point in time when the "Law of the Father" had not yet found application) by associating the female image on the screen with his experience of m/other as a powerful goddess central to his sense of meaning and world.

Mulvey's views find support in Karen Horney's (1973) argument that the small boy understands his m/other's private parts as way too large for his own to fit and lays the foundation for a life-long significance of fear and dread. Once again, this experience plays on his fear of castration and may be the basis of future resentment towards the female of the species. Nancy Chodorow (1989, p. 6) has commended Horney's work in the following apt words, namely that we

> ...[are] yet to find a convincing explanation for the virulence of masculine anger, fear, and resentment of women, or aggression towards them, that bypasses even if it does not rest with the psychoanalytical account, first suggested by Horney, that men resent and fear women because they experience them as powerful mothers.

If m/other haunts the cinema, as I have attempted to demonstrate, this is an illustration of Freud's (1968a) idea of the uncanny (the return of the repressed) eliciting horror upon sight of the already familiar (the powerful image of the m/other from a time denoted as prehistory or "preherstory"). Mother is not always a figure of dread, though, and I proceed to consider the political roots of the much healthier mother-son relationship in historical Chinese Buddhism before analysing the selected film.

The mother-son relationship as a political construct in Chinese Buddhism

In a review of Andrew Cole's *Mothers and Sons in Chinese Buddhism* (1998), Charles Jones (1998, p. 410) asks, "[h]ow did Buddhism make use of certain fault lines in Confucian family values in order to gain acceptance and support in China?"

According to Cole, when Buddhism migrated from India to China around 2 000 years ago – Buddhism was fully integrated into Chinese culture by the 5th century CE – it encountered serious domestic resistance. The Buddhist injunction to children to leave their parental home and join the *sangha* (the Buddhist temple community) was frowned upon by the Confucian values embedded in Han Chinese culture of that time. Cole (1998) argues that when the girl is made to leave her family home upon marriage (as indicated above), she has to join her husband's household and, amid loneliness and longing for her siblings, attempt to carve out a new existence in an alien, often hostile environment. In view of the inevitable slave economy of competition among women in patriarchal societies (explored above), as pre-modern Chinese culture certainly was, Buddhist theologians saw an opportunity to exploit this weakness (the potential mother's emotional vulnerability) to their own advantage.

The idea was to encourage a strong, emotionally satisfying, mother and son relationship to lighten the plight of mother's desperate attempts to forge ties in a hostile and alien landscape through a combination of both myth and teaching societies (but see Lassoff [1998] for a view to the contrary). Cole is referring to the neglect of the m/other in the Chinese household. By his use of Margery Wolf's concept of "uterine" power struggles (noted above), Cole (1998) explores the notion that Buddhist sacred texts (specially commissioned for the Chinese theatre) positioned the mother as desperate for redemption by her son, the crown on any Chinese mother's reproductive efforts. Cole (1998) contends that mothers earn rebirth in hell because of their so-called "animalistic" nature (sex and excretion) as she was, after all, the one to conceive and carry him to term. In one of the Buddhist myths covered by Cole (1998), *The illustrated tale of Mu Lian saving his mother from the nether world*, Mu Lian discovers his mother in the Avīcī Hell, a space specifically reserved for mothers and from whence he saves her.

This ideological exploitation of the marginalised mother in ancient Chinese culture provided an inducement for the mother to cultivate and nurture a meaningful relationship with her son as her principal alley in an otherwise hostile, patriarchal environment (a slave economy teeming with back-stabbing females). Mother's precious relationship with her son was an infrequent if meaningful encounter between the sexes in pre-modern China and this dynamic is still observable in post-Mao Han culture despite it being a largely secular environment. Men,

suggests Susan Mann (1997, p. 15), "poured their most powerful emotions into a lifelong bond with their mother".

The important question which this brief historical overview of the political origins of the beautiful mother-son relationship in Han Chinese culture seeks to answer is whether or not it could be used to rescue ailing maternal discourse, specifically as it has become crystalised in the relationship between mother and daughter in contemporary patriarchal societies. Published accounts of the emotional depth of the Chinese mother-son dyad are rare. Zhang's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006) provides us with a precious version of this. To this end, I turn to an analysis of Zhang's cinematic production.

The film

Curse of the Golden Flower ([2006] Chinese Mandarin soundtrack and English subtitles) is set in the 10th century during the reign of the Tang dynasty. Here, I explore the fascinating mother-son relationship between the Empress Phoenix (Gong Li) and her beloved son, Prince Jai (Jay Chou), as it unfolds in the filmic narrative of Zhang's masterpiece.

The unique quality of the Empress' relationship with her son is instantly apparent in early scenes where Prince Jai relates his concern over the Empress' health (and her strained relations with the Emperor) as well as her unwillingness to consume the medicinal potions prepared by imperial decree allegedly for the anaemia with which she is afflicted. It is only to Prince Jai that the Empress confides her knowledge of the secret ingredient recently added to her medicine, namely the Persian black fungus. The Empress makes it clear to him that the recent addition is a ruse designed by the Emperor (Chow Yun Fat) to drive her insane in a period of a couple of months. The ease of communication, albeit on very sensitive matters, and the utter and complete trust between the two is a pleasure to observe. Prince Jai's love for and loyalty to his mother (he addresses her respectfully and tenderly as "Mother") precipitates the Empress' successful attempts to convince him that her welfare depends on his joining her armed insurrection on the day of the Festival of Chong Yan (the golden flower referred to in the title), when thousands of gold-coloured chrysanthemums are in full flower. Prince Jai, as he admits to the Emperor in the final scene, was only moved to rebel because of his concern for and devotion to his mother and certainly not because of any designs he may have had on the throne. In the final scene, which evinces a very tender exchange between mother and son, rarely seen in cinema, Prince Jai ends his life, after begging her forgiveness for failing her, rather than agreeing to the Emperor's demand that he personally administer his mother's "medicine".

The significance of the scene leading up to the final scene, as I have just described it, lies in the deduction on the part of the audience that the Emperor appears to be aware of the fact that both Prince Jai and the Empress have full knowledge of the secret ingredient, the Persian black fungus. Bearing in mind the vicissitudes of "uterine power", explored by Margery Wolf, and the positioning of the mother-son bond in Chinese history right up to the present day, Mann (1997, p. 33) refers to "the filial devotion [which] they [mothers] inspired in their sons".

Phenomenology seeks to make sense of social or psychological phenomena (such as the healthy, emotionally satisfying mother-son nexus in Confucian societies) from the perspective of the lived experience of the respondents. By identifying the

elements that make up that experience, the researcher would be in a position to reflect on both the parts and the whole. Welman and Kruger (1999, p. 189) express this idea well by arguing that "phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of [the] people involved". A former study, one I am in complete agreement with, has noted the following values present in this very special relationship:

> Immense mutual loyalty, consideration and respect; unbounded love and a deep emotional bond; utter and complete trust; the ability to communicate and talk freely about anything and, unbridled freedom of action (though not without expressing an opinion on the wisdom of the proposed behaviour (Lötter, 2014, p. 122).

Against this background, I turn to a cross-cultural comparison of salient features of the mother-son bond in Chinese Han society, a generality in that culture, with that of the "black swan" phenomenon of a healthy mother-daughter relationship in patriarchy, namely that of Colette and her mother, Sido.

Colette

"Blissful childhood" and "self-realisation" are ideas that mark Colette's immense literary output (Marks, 1961; Kristeva, 2004). Her mother, Sido, is a haven of "warm[th], of security and of love" (Marks, 1961, p. 202). I argue that judged against the parameters and quality of the mother-son dynamic in Han Chinese culture, Colette's bond with her mother compares very well.

Three key themes that seem to punctuate Colette's life are a thoroughly unconventional lifestyle (such as intergenerational love and bisexuality), compassion/caring for others and an uncompromising commitment to personal freedom. Colette, for example, was "sensitive to female masochism and the miseries of young wives" (Kristeva, 2004, p. 68). Sido found "constant joy" in all aspects of life (Marks, 1961, pp. 205, 206) as did Colette (Kristeva, 2004) and the values which informed her mother's life are evident from the pages of Colette's books of fiction. Colette (quoted in Kristeva, 2004, p. 13) wrote lovingly about Sido as a woman who in "a shamefaced, miserly, narrow minded little region, opened her village home to stray cats, tramps, and pregnant girls". In one of Colette's (1989, p. 8) many short stories, "If I had a daughter...", she touchingly reminisces about "the safety of confident mothers".

Unlike the Electra complex of vicious back-biting females under conditions of patriarchal oppression (which shows convincingly how daughters hope to eliminate mother to replace her as father's companion (Chesler, 2009), Colette's women participate with one another in "tenderness and [with] compliments" (Marks, 1961, p. 116). This might explain why the "other woman" in Colette's fiction is accommodated and accepted rather than maligned and rejected (Marks, 1961; Kristeva, 2004). Colette makes no apology for her embracing female *jouissance* ("orgasmic bliss"; Stoltzfus, 1996, p. 8) and her right to happiness (Kristeva, 2004).

Kristeva's (2004, p. 21) case for the legacy which Sido left Colette is formulated in the following arresting words: "Happiness at any price, with no moral sense other than that of following her desires and writing them down: this is an art of living that goes against the teaching of the Church and its secular successors". It is striking that Colette, unlike many women desperate to exorcise or purge their mothers (as noted above), became her mother with glee in later life (Marks, 1961). "I imitate her manner. I still imitate it", declares Colette (cited in Marks, 1961, p. 207). Kristeva (2004, p. 13) notes that Colette evolved from "perversion, *père*-version, identifying with father, to *mère*-version, identifying with mother". Finally, what we should aim for is, in the words of Kristeva (2004, p. 69), Simone de Beauvoir's acknowledgement of the "exceptional harmony between Colette and Sido, 'a well-balanced and generous mother'". This is an important aspect of the dynamic, since the mother, as I have indicated above, is herself a neglected daughter.

Discussion

Although most commentators have equated the gaze or the look with male penetration or colonisation, there is also an awareness that the gaze could also inhabit a female audience (consider, for example, the glorification of the male icon in Western movies). Women are also alive to the idea of taking back the "look" or "returning the gaze". Penley (1989, p. 28) puts this fascinating notion in the following terms: "If filmic practice, like the fetishistic ritual, is an inscription of the look on the body of the mother, we must now begin to consider the possibilities and consequences of the mother returning that look".

These ideas tie in with the skills and the mindset necessary (Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1988) for such a "cultural paradigm shift" to take back the night (a well-known Second Wave feminist movement cry [1969–1976; Brownmiller, 2000]. Gina Marchetti (2006) argues that film is one cultural site where masculinity has been pushed into greater crisis. Tani Barlow (2002, p. 156) appears to concur with Marchetti's view with her suggestion that film allows "the still unpredicated female subject" the space to explore womanhood beyond the "damaging codes of masculine gender performativity". While Laura Mulvey argues that cinema as a cultural icon should be destroyed because it glorifies the subjugation of women as phallic objects, Constance Penley (1989, p. 28) suggests a different course of action in contending instead that cinema should pursue a "narrative which reunifies and rephallisises a spectator posed by the film as coherent and all powerful." Said in another way, the master's weapon(s) can be used against himself.

I find the notion captivating that vision, both glorified and exemplified by the art form known as cinema, began to wane as the sense of choice among humans at a time when masculinity is in crisis and yet it provides a good site for the phenomenological exploration of social and psychological problems caused by patriarchy, such as the damning mother/daughter relationship.

Conclusion

Virtuality became a curious, even uncanny, site of research in the late twentieth century (consider Baudrillard's famous idea of simulacra, as an example) when, as Linda Williams points out, sight has to make space for the other senses as well, similarly to how the glorification of ocular testimony has increasingly had to be problematised. Nonetheless, I have attempted to demonstrate that cinema is an especially fruitful medium for phenomenological research. In particular, I tried to demonstrate that technology of sight (namely cinema) provides a privileged site for the investigation of psychological phenomena, such

as the fractured mother-daughter bond under conditions of patriarchal oppression.

By way of illustration, if Chesler and Kristeva are correct in their assessment that resuscitating the mother-daughter relationship so pivotal to the course of a woman's life in contemporary patriarchal societies can help to improve the emotional well-being and mental health of women, then I submit that this exercise in cross-cultural interpretative phenomenology was worthwhile, especially at a time when masculinity (both in East and West) is in crisis. Is there a link between the waning of the hegemony of vision (in the shape of the gaze as colonising and penetrating) and an emerging awareness of the value of cinema as a site for the phenomenological exploration of social and psychological problems intimately tied up with patriarchy as a historical contingency? I suggest that the answer is affirmative. To this end, interpretative phenomenology has shown itself to be a suitable methodology for investigating psychological phenomena through the visual virtuality of cinema.

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