From Icon to Objectification: Decoding the Mediated Power Dynamics of the Female Body's Symbolic Representation

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Abstract. The symbolic representation of the female body in the mediatized society has undergone a historical transformation from iconization to objectification. This study integrates semiotics with the theory of the gaze of power to deconstruct cross-media texts in the realms of art and journalism, revealing their mechanisms of control. Technological iteration profoundly reshapes modes of gaze—the ritualistic viewing of painting, photography's myth of objectivity, and algorithmic filtering in short videos collectively construct differentiated power maps, eroding female subjectivity within symbolic consumption. Empirical evidence indicates that this mechanism not only induces body anxiety but also exacerbates societal cognitive biases through the tragic framing of news victim reports and the fashion industry's standardized esthetics. This research advocates dismantling representational conventions through feminist artistic deconstruction and gender-sensitive journalistic standards, thereby reconstructing the discursive order of body politics.

Keywords: Mediatization, Semantics, The gaze of power, Visual culture.

1. From Icon to Materialization

The gaze is a mode of viewing imbued with power. Following the Renaissance, men typically functioned as the subjects of this gaze, while women were constructed as its objects. From a semiotic perspective, what is gazed upon is never merely the biological body, but rather a 'symbol' continuously inscribed by culture. The power to shape this symbol is often held by those who wield the authority to encode it.

1.1. The Iconic Era (Ancient to Modern Times)

During the 'Iconic' period, the female body did not exist as an independent entity but served multiple narrative functions—carrying religious, political, and moral significance—becoming a vessel for divinity, class, order, and idealized beauty.

In religious art, female figures were often highly symbolic. The Virgin Mary in Christian art gradually evolved into the more humanly luminous image of a compassionate mother during the Renaissance, yet her core remained centered on the theological concept of 'immaculate purity'. In Buddhist art, Indian deities originally embodied both male and female aspects. Upon their transmission to China's Mainland, they gradually transformed into gentle, compassionate female figures. Tang Dynasty wooden sculptures of Guanyin depicted her with a full, rounded physique and a serene, composed expression, regarded as the ideal embodiment of salvation and benevolence.

Observing courtly paintings, European aristocratic portraits often emphasized familial status and noble lineage through sumptuous attire, jewels, and specific postures, rendering the body an extension of identity and politics. In the Portrait of Queen Marie de' Medici of France, Marie wears a pearl-encrusted velvet gown adorned with three-dimensional embroidered patterns and gilded lilies bearing the emblem of Florence. The intricate lace trimmings on cuffs and collar vividly depicts aristocratic refinement. The noblewomen depicted in Zhou Fang's Chinese court painting Ladies with Flower Hairpins wear resplendent attire, their figures voluptuous and opulent. Moreover, in early literary and moral discourse, the female body frequently served as a vehicle for ethical instruction. Within Christian tradition, Eve was portrayed as the origin of original sin, thereby reinforcing notions of disciplinary control and asceticism regarding the female form. Similar disciplinary frameworks exist in traditional Chinese texts, as exemplified below:

Women were bound by the moral code of the 'Three Obediences', lacking autonomy in decision-making or the principle of exclusive devotion. Thus, before marriage, a maiden was to obey her father; after marriage, her husband; and upon her husband's death, her son. Hence it was said: the father is the heaven of his children, and the husband is the heaven of his wife. For a woman to wear the highest mourning robe, the 'zhanchui', for two of her closest kin would be like asserting there could be two heavens. For a woman cannot simultaneously revere two supreme authorities.

The female body during the 'Iconic' period was often depicted in artistic representations lacking individual authenticity, serving instead as a composite vessel for religious beliefs, power structures, and moral concepts, as shown in Table 1. Under the guise of idealized beauty, these figures were in fact constrained by specific social structures and ideologies, confined upon the 'altar'.

Table 1. Examples of Symbolisation in the "Iconic" Period

Domain	Case Study	Symbolic Representation
Religious Art	Christianity: The Virgin Mary in 'The Lamentation of Christ' (as shown in Figure 1)	Sacred maternal love, immaculate purity
	Buddhism: Tang Dynasty Chinese Wooden Guanyin Sculpture	Symbol of redemption and compassion
Courtly Portraiture	Portraits of European Noblewomen	Family status, noble lineage, and perpetuation of power
	Tang Dynasty Chinese 'Ladies with Flowered Hairpins'	Political marriage alliances, familial continuity, material prosperity
Moral Admonition	Christian Literature: The Figure of Eve	Source of original sin, asceticism
	Chinese Confucian Texts: 'Three Obediences and Four Virtues' Ethics	Subordination within the patriarchal system, preservation of familial order

1.2. The Fading Aura and the Shift in Gaze

With the gradual rise of Impressionism and modernist art movements, the aura of maternal fertility began to be challenged and gradually dissolved. Artists restored the female figure to its natural existence within everyday life: Camille in Monet's paintings, her skirt fluttering in the breeze, resting leisurely beneath the shade of trees, or lying pale and barely alive in the depths of winter.

Table 2. Camille, Monet's Wife, in His Paintings

Title (Year)	Details	Painting
Woman with a Parasol (1875)	Camille wears a contented smile, her expression relaxed and at ease Predominantly rendered in bright hues of yellow, blue, white and green, it constructs a tranquil yet vibrant world, with freely applied brushstrokes—small touches and tonal values juxtaposed—creating a harmonious effect through visual blending by the viewer.	
Camille on Her Deathbed (1879)	Camille appears emaciated yet serene and peaceful Dominated by cool blue-purple tones, complemented by yellow and gray hues, creating a sorrowful, oppressive atmosphere Brushstrokes are wild, coarse, hurried and fragmented, conveying a sense of helplessness in the face of life's passing	



Figure 1. The Pietà

(Caption: Michelangelo Buonarroti, 1498, Italy, marble, St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City, Rome)

Post-Impressionism and Fauvism further emphasized subjective expression and the liberation of color. In The Dance, Matisse employed intense and exaggerated hues, transforming them into vehicles for emotion and rhythm, as illustrated in Figure 2. Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon transformed the female form into a formal experiment and conceptual statement. Moving into Pop Art, Andy Warhol's Marilyn Monroe series employed repetitive printing and garish colors to utterly symbolize the female image, rendering it a mass-replicable cultural commodity.

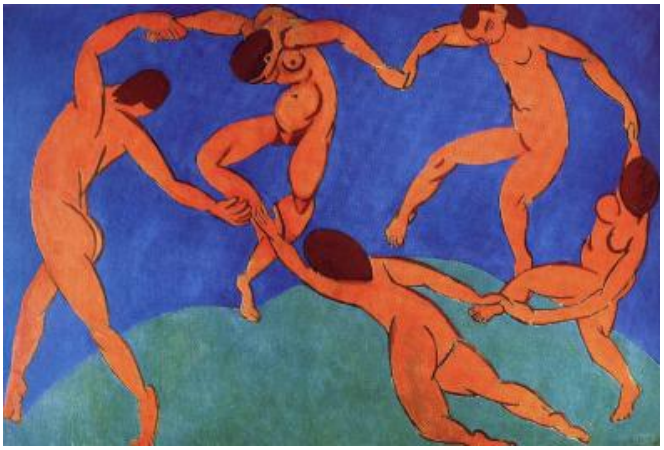


Figure 2. The Dance

(Caption: Henri Matisse, 1910, France, oil on canvas, The State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg)

In contemporary cinema, the symbolization and objectification of the female body exhibit more complex dimensions. Taking four films as examples: Bergman's The Virgin Spring perpetuates the classical model of women as moral icons. Karin, the violated and deceased maiden, whose immaculate body becomes a symbol of patriarchal vengeance and religious sacrifice, essentially serves as a sacred vessel for the moral order. In contrast, Akhman's Jeanne Dielman offers a radical subversion of this paradigm. using near real-time long takes to document a middle-aged widow's repetitive, mundane daily labors over three days. This renders her body neither a spectacle for the gaze nor a symbol of emotion or desire, but rather a silent, concrete, materially grounded existence. To highlight the interiority of women's lives, giving voice to their inner thoughts and silences. Liberating the female body from drama and aestheticization, it achieves a complete disenchantment of the "icon" tradition. In the Oscar-nominated movie 'Poor Thing', the protagonist Bella is portrayed as an 'artificial icon' possessing both an infantile mind and a mature female body. Her sacredness lies not in traditional moral purity, but in her untamed authenticity and desire. Yet this purported freedom and rebellion remains encapsulated within a highly stylized, consumable visual spectacle, transforming into a meticulously engineered new icon. In the extreme scenario of Some Kind of Matter, the female body is directly presented as a material substance to be cut, deformed, and traded. Here, the logic of objectification reaches its zenith—the body ceases to be a symbol and becomes raw, malleable material, utterly reduced to a direct vessel for power and fear.

Throughout its history, female cinematic discourse has remained deeply embedded within patriarchal culture, consistently failing to break free from the grand, rational, and binary oppositional narratives centered on male perspectives, and thus has not developed an independently introspective framework. Thus, the female body undergoes a complete transformation from a divine symbol to a medium symbolized by desire, control, and consumption.

1.3. The Infiltration of Reification

Visualization is equivalent to knowledge; visually constructed knowledge is regarded as authoritative, and the operation of modern power is a highly visual product. Within contemporary visual culture, the art world has been at the forefront of mounting a critical response to this logic of objectification. As illustrated in Figure 3, Judy Chicago confronts patriarchy's disciplining of the female body through her installation, employing butterfly-shaped dinner plates and female genital symbols.

News and mass media have largely reinforced this objectifying logic. The fashion industry perpetually manufactures anxieties about standardized body types and eternal youth, converting them into consumerist momentum; in news coverage, female victims are frequently reduced to archetypal victims whose agency is obscured, while female politicians often become plastic figures subject to scrutiny—their political views supplanted by discussions of their appearance. Reports on female

athletes often focus excessively on their glamorous appearance, placing women in a position of being "looked at" and "scrutinized" while also turning them into visual objects intended to satisfy male voyeurism and attract attention.

2. The Cross-Media Gaze

2.1. The Persisting Icon and Its Challenges

Liu Tao's theory of "selective presentation" in Visual Stylistics posits that within the contemporary media landscape, outlets frequently activate sacred "signifieds" within the public collective consciousness by meticulously selecting and arranging "signifiers". Under this mechanism, female role models cease to be merely specific individuals and gradually become new sacred icons embodying collective ideals and value recognition. For instance, when reporting on certain female scientists or athletes, the media often omits accounts of their mistakes or setbacks, deliberately emphasizing their professional competence, resilient character, or defining moments. This serves to shape them into symbolic carriers transcending ordinary individuals.

Yet, historical iconoclasm campaigns caution us that excessive media glorification or simplification risks a dilemma: either the sacred becomes inaccessible through invisibility, or it devolves into hollow "idols" through excessive symbolisation.

2.2. Commercialization and the Erotic Gaze

Advertisements relentlessly depict women's faces, chests, legs, figures, and hair, fragmenting women—who are complete individuals with independent personalities and thoughts—into mere alluring "parts." At the same time, they encourage women to internalize such depictions as self-imposed expectations for their own image. The root cause lies in the deeply ingrained patriarchal mindset, which resurfaces and thrives amid the expansion of commercial culture.The female figures frequently appearing in perfume and automobile advertisements are often reduced to mere visual signifiers. This process subtly commodifies the female body, constituting a form of invisible symbolic violence. Perfume advertisements diminish women in three primary ways: by equating them with the product itself, through sexually provocative and suggestive themes, and by portraying women merely as tools to attract men. For instance, Saint Laurent's "Inversed Paris" fragrance campaign directly employs the marketing tagline "the scent that captivates men", assigning a narrative arc from "innocence" to "conquest" to the fragrance's top, middle and base notes. This effectively constructs a symbolic system centered on sexual allure, where the body becomes an erotic medium amplifying the product's appeal. During consumption, viewers may misinterpret the body as a purchasable commodity, believing that consumption can replicate equivalent allure. In automotive advertising, female bodies are often artfully positioned beside vehicles, implying male consumers can simultaneously possess both the product and the female form through purchase. Ultimately, within these advertising symbols, the female body functions both as a signifier of desire and, at the signified level, is dissolved into an accessory, achieving a complete appropriation of its symbolic meaning.

2.3. News Ethics and the Victim

When reporting incidents involving female victims, media outlets frequently grapple with ethical boundaries. Official media tend to exercise greater caution, often employing techniques such as pixelation to protect privacy. Certain non-official media or commercial platforms, however, may lean towards sensationalist narratives. For instance, one platform featured headlines like "Highly attractive woman subjected to domestic violence by husband, facial injuries horrifying to behold."

The divergence in reporting frameworks between these two media types fundamentally reflects the tension between journalistic ethics and commercial interests. State-backed media, supported by public resources, prioritize maintaining social stability and upholding media credibility. Conversely, certain non-state outlets, driven by the pressure to monetize traffic, frequently place dissemination efficiency above ethical considerations.

2.4. Technological Reshaping and the Self-Gaze

Digital technology, particularly the widespread application of artificial intelligence and filter tools, is profoundly reshaping how women perceive their own bodies. Image processing and AI-generated tools such as Meitu, Xingtu, and Doubao can swiftly produce socially idealized "beauty" images with a single click, merely requiring textual prompts. These tools operate upon the quantification, categorization, and standardization of physical features. Consequently, women may increasingly perceive their unaltered bodies as imperfections requiring correction, becoming ensnared in an endless pursuit of an idealized image. This leads to self-denial and self-criticism, potentially diverting energy away from acquiring social resources.

3. The Individual and the Collective within Networks of Power

3.1. Towards Women

Power networks first inflict profound psychological oppression upon individual women.

Social media algorithms relentlessly push idealized body templates—such as the 'A4 waist' and 'cartoon legs'—trapping women in perpetual body anxiety. More gravely, this anxiety leads to self-objectification—women begin viewing their bodies as products requiring perpetual refinement, framing bodily alterations as legitimate self-improvement choices while obscuring the underlying consumerist logic and gendered power structures. In more extreme cases, women publicly share provocative photographs to garner attention, a manifestation of psychological distortion under the weight of such pressures.

3.2. Towards Society

The esthetic ideal epitomized by the 'fair, slender, and youthful' standard is perpetually reproduced and disseminated through film and television casting, influencer marketing, and variety shows, gradually establishing itself as a pervasive beauty norm. Female protagonists in certain productions exhibit striking homogeneity, while characters deviating from this standard are frequently marginalized or caricatured, further reinforcing public stereotypes. This homogenized esthetic also exacerbates social inequality. In employment, social circles, and romantic relationships, women with conventionally attractive appearances secure interview opportunities more readily, while those not conforming to mainstream beauty ideals are frequently excluded from specific social spheres.

Moreover, this gaze narrows the public discourse surrounding gender issues. Complex women's concerns are often reduced to superficial debates about bodily autonomy – such as "freedom of dress" or "compulsory beauty duties" – diverting societal reflection towards superficialities.

3.3. Regarding Media

In their pursuit of traffic and engagement, media platforms continually reinforce the homogenization of esthetic content. Algorithmic recommendation systems favor promoting visual content aligned with mainstream esthetics. Concurrently, the technology itself becomes an instrument for cementing preconceptions. For instance, certain image recognition systems automatically identify users wearing skirts as female, or misclassify muscular female bodybuilders as male... While these technical operations appear data-driven, they effectively replicate and amplify existing gender and appearance biases in society, thereby legitimizing and normalizing prejudice within intelligent systems.

4. Summary

The female body has undergone a metamorphosis from a sacred vessel in religious art to a signifier of desire within consumer society. This transformation is fundamentally a continuous appropriation of the body by power structures through the medium of technology. Renaissance depictions of the

Virgin Mary employed the golden ratio and soft-light techniques to establish a universal paradigm of veneration, its visual grammar and implicit patriarchy monopolizing the divine nature of women. Photography's mechanical reproduction of the body, however, dismantled this traditional aura through the myth of "objectivity". The movie industry codified Laura Mulvey's "male gaze". into narrative conventions, reducing the female body to a visual stepping stone for plot progression. Worse still, in the social media era, under the guise of algorithmic optimization, the "fair, young, and slender" template shaped by TikTok filters has become a new moral straitjacket. This has transformed Foucault's panoptic prison into an omnipresent theater of self-discipline, making Baudrillard's prophesied "hyperreality" the ultimate weapon for annihilating subjectivity.

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