

“Dying to Survive”: Reflection on Realistic Themes and Its Artistic Presentation

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Abstract—The film *Dying to Survive* constructs the growth of a civilian hero from the perspective of the contradiction between leukemia patients and high-priced cancer drugs through the artistic processing and adaption of real events but retains the core part of its positive values. In addition, its mature audio-visual language, expression techniques of new realism, metaphor, symbol and other techniques show the concern and healing to reality. The actor's super acting skills get the audience deeply moved, and arouse their resonance through the artistic treatment, which is of great significance for promoting the reform of the medical system and the inclusion of expensive drugs into the medical insurance system.

Keywords—realism; ethical dilemmas; metaphor; symbol

I. INTRODUCTION

Dying to Survive, starring by Xu Zheng, has made 3 billion yuan by July 30 since its release on July 5, which has been one of the few films in recent years winning both public praise and box office. As a typical commercial film, the success of the play marks the return of realistic themes. In the face of the process of film marketization and industrialization, it completes an active exploration and practice. Gao Changli, director of the publicity department of the state administration of radio, film and television, said, “Don’t blame the subject for lack of artistic talent”. This shows that the attention and criticism of reality in films like *Dying to Survive* has great popularity among the audience. Through the artistic processing of reality, the film narrates the rigorous story from the perspective of cancer patients and constructs the growth of a civilian hero. Also, the mature audio-visual language and actors’ talented skills reach the hearts of the audience and arouse their resonance through artistic treatment, which is of great significance for promoting the reform of the medical system and integrating the high-priced drugs into the medical insurance system.

II. THE CONTRADICTION OF REALISM AND ETHICAL DILEMMA

Dying to Survive is based on the “Lu Yong case” in 2015 and is based on real social events. However, after the audio-visual language and artistic processing of the film, the film impresses people with emotion, reflects and criticizes reality, and pays attention to People's Daily life. The multiple dilemmas of laws, principles and emotions and even the

irreconcilable ethical paradoxes trigger people's thinking on expensive drugs and generic drugs, which fully reflects the unique charm of films and the significant role of how they reflect and interfere with reality. The dilemma is often faced by people in daily life. Meanwhile, the dramatic and emotional tension of the art works is embodied in the dilemma. The movie constructs the survival dilemma of leukemia people, the moral dilemma of drug dealers, the legal dilemma of police, and the commercial dilemma of pharmaceutical companies. Cheng Yong also grows from a selfish and cowardly medicine businessman into a civilian hero who is of human conscience awareness and values righteousness more than money.

The film, of course, sets the premise that human nature is good. There are almost no villains in the film. The only villain is Zhang Changlin, who sells fake medicine mixed with flour. He was so aggressive that he threatened Cheng with a police report, seeking to wrest control of his generic drug agency and push patients into a dilemma. But at the last minute, this despicable man actually kept the secret and protected Cheng Yong. As for the drug makers who sell expensive drugs, the innovation and development of any new drug requires a lot of investment of money and time, and the scientific research and market are faced with huge risks. Therefore, only high market pricing and strict intellectual property legal system can ensure the sustainability of drug companies' research and operation, and better help humans to overcome more diseases. But when this dilemma of modern medicine is transferred to ordinary patients, there is a huge contradiction between expensive drugs and the poor who cannot afford them, and the ethical paradox is even more acute.

In such dramatic conflict, the drug sellers who maintains intellectual property rights and patents, the leukemia patient who buys generic drugs, the police who maintains judicial justice and social order, the patient who helps the leukemia patient buy lifesaving drugs, and even Cheng Yong who helps himself save people using his own money are all actually not wrong. What went wrong in the end? In the film, the police chose to escape. Under the premise that law outweighs emotion, the films show the forgiveness of the law for human nature and the concern for people's reality. The film uses such reflection and interrogation to reflect reality but is unusually calm and restrained in its narration. The mercy does not outweigh the law, the law neither outweigh the mercy. The final judgment to Cheng Yong and the scene of “ten miles long

crowd on the street sending the prison car" are the best annotations.

III. MATURE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION AND AUDIO-VISUAL LANGUAGE

Yin Hong, a professor at Tsinghua University, said: "the completion of the film is terrific. From the characterization to detailed matting, from emotion to performance, from rhythm to narration, the film has achieved the rare maturity of domestic films. Even its sense of proportion and easiness is something that many big directors don't have... If this film is recognized by the market, it will definitely promote the overall improvement of Chinese films in classic narrative."

A. Typical Protagonist and Typical Supporting Roles

The story of the film is based on the focus on realistic medical treatment and patients, and Cheng Yong, as the protagonist is also a typical character. Based on the real version of Lu Yong's case in 2015, the film highlights the dramatic tension of the narrative through the transformation and characterization of the character Cheng Yong. The film retains the core part of positive values in real events, while other elements focus on the creation method serving the theme, which makes the film have a deeper meaning and interpretation space.

The scriptwriter sets up the relations between the four patients and the protagonist and makes the four supporting characters flat and typical in order to promote the growth of the protagonist and the completion of the character growth arc from the outside. In the beginning, Cheng Yong is a selfish, cowardly, laid-back individual owner of an "Indian god oil shop" that profited from smuggling drugs to patients. Finally, he turned into a civilian hero who was willing to sell hundreds of thousands of drugs every month and risked breaking the law to buy drugs for patients. The film makes the protagonist a healthy person from the bottom of the society who is poor and destitute. The more miserable the protagonist is in the society, the lower his position is, the better it facilitates the growth arc of the characters in the plot later. And the other supporting characters are actually part of the character of the protagonist, which will be activated by external things at a certain time. The yellow hair boy shows the brave characters of Cheng Yong; the priest shows the inner faith of the hero; Liu Sihui shows his characteristics that is hurt, insulted but willing to sacrifice. These four characters, as the externalization of Cheng Yong's, stimulate and guide him to go forward courageously, turning him from a small citizen living at the bottom of society into a hero. Lu's suicide and the yellow-haired boy's sacrifice directly led to the outbreak of bravery, kindness, justice and dedication in Cheng Yong's characters, which promoted the development of the story plot and completed the growth and baptism of the protagonist.

In particular, the sharp contrast between Cheng Yong and yellow-haired boy reflects the characters' relationship under the frame of "father and son", including the growth and change from "patricide" to "father" in the general structure of this type of film. The relationship between the yellow-haired boy and Cheng Yong changes from the misunderstanding of stealing

drugs and to finally become partnerships, which makes this character's psychological connotation gradually enriched in the advancement of the plot. At the same time, Cheng Yong was also a hero who transformed from a man being in difficulties aiming only at making money to a hero stimulated by the death of his companions. Cheng Yong's growth finally gets to the same position as the yellow-haired boy. The biggest characteristic of the boy's character is being brave to fight for justice. He steals medicine for other leukemia person, which makes the meaning and connotation of these two roles integrating in the process of interactions. Especially in the scene of the sunset at the harbor, Cheng Yong and the boy have two close-up shots. The usually silent and indifferent boy happily mocks the dog barking, further establishing this "father and son" frame. The psychological interaction between the two characters fills the dramatic tension within the screen.

B. The Film Technique of New Realism

Neorealism emerged in Italy in the 1940s. It inherits the tradition of realism in film and puts forward the slogan of "carry the camera to the street" to reproduce life as it is. From the perspective of subject, *Dying to Survive* is a typical new realism. From the perspective of photography technique, the film adopts primitive shoulder photography: shaking pictures and a large number of medium and close shots highlight the characters. It seeks for beauty and finds beauty in ordinary things and emphasizes the plain, natural and full-bodied life atmosphere.

Visual presentation: to match the neo-realist style of presentation, the film's light and color, as well as the overall art, reflect a unique cold and morbid beauty, similar to Freud's paintings. The film is a typical commercial film, so the color can not only be black and white. The whole film is mainly composed of yellow, orange, blue and white, and the color moves from strong to flat according to the need. Therefore, the color of the whole film presents a harsh sense of reality, but the picture and details of the whole film can stand up to the scrutiny of the audience. For example, at the beginning of the film, the Indian god oil store where Cheng Yong is located is presented in the red neon lights from outside, the noisy environment and the dim light inside vividly show the image of a decadent and slovenly middle-aged greasy man playing games in front of the computer. Then, as the story goes, when the store reappears, the neon lights are switched off, leaving only the cold fluorescent light on the desktop. As for Liu Sihui's house, the clothes rack filled with clothes, leopard print windbreaker and snakeskin pants all show her profession. As the story progresses, her hair turns from wine-red to black and her clothes become more serious, while the children's graffiti on the wall shows the loneliness of a little girl who is ill at home and left unattended.

C. Non-realistic Presentation Skills

Although the whole film has a typical realistic theme, it also uses symbols, metaphors and other non-realistic expressions.

The statue of kali has appeared twice in the film. Firstly, it was seen on the table of Cheng Yong's Indian god oil store at the beginning, as a decoration, which seems rough and cheap.

The second time was that Lu's illness was reaching a critical moment. Cheng Yong went to India to buy medicine. In the chaotic and noisy streets of India, the whole street was shrouded in the smoke of pesticides, where loomed a colossal statue of the goddess. The whole picture presents a low saturation effect and presents a sharp contrast with the real picture of the whole film. At this point, Cheng Yong is at the turning point of his life. His emotions need to be expressed through the environment, while the goddess statue represents death and rebirth. Therefore, the treatment of this paragraph, which originates from the reality but is not the reality, presents the way of expression of art.

Another typical image is the mask. People with leukemia wear face masks daily to prevent the attack and infection of the virus. Lu was wearing a face mask when he first saw Cheng Yong. A mask is also a disguise, covering one's expression and heart. At the beginning, when Cheng Yong saw those leukemia people, everyone was wearing a mask, because he is just a drug dealer. There is nothing but interest among them. But at the end of the film, Cheng Yong is on a prison van, the sun is falling on the ground, and countless people with leukemia who do not know each other on both sides of the road have taken off their masks and smiled at him. The image is ritualistic, and the film is shot in slow motion to highlight the appeal of the scene.

IV. CONCLUSION

Of course, the greatest value and significance of "*Dying to Survive*" lies in that it makes people and the government think deeply about the reform of the medical system. It dares to touch social hot spots, pays attention to reality, but does not give the answer. It reveals the complexity of human nature, but at the same time brings hope and light. It focuses on and even changes the reality, which is the biggest meaning of the film.

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