

# ***Exploring Cultural Differences Between Different Countries Through Realistic Films***

**Chenrui Guo<sup>1,a,\*</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>*Radio & Television Editing and Directing, Inner Mongolia Arts University, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, 011500, China*

*a. dzbdcyxxk@163.com*

*\*corresponding author*

**Abstract:** In recent years, films with realist themes and underlying narratives from different countries have gradually entered the public eye and received public attention. These films portray different underclass characters based on different cultural backgrounds and deeply reflect the problems faced by society according to the changes of the characters. This paper explores the cultural kernel of realism films in different countries by analyzing and comparing the plot content, audiovisual characteristics and other aspects of the three films *Joker*, *Memories of Murder* and *I Am Not the God of Medicine*, and finally concludes that this type of film plays a positive role in the development of contemporary society by warning and reflecting on the development of contemporary society and promoting the improvement of laws, and it also draws the common point that the three films show social problems through the imperfect minor characters. this common ground.

**Keywords:** realist themes, audiovisual style, character change, film.

## **1. Introduction**

As a highly influential art form, the core of realist film is to face the problems of real society and bring visual and auditory enjoyment to the audience, while at the same time, it serves as a means of expressing life and revealing the contradictions within society. Realist film has the unique ability to directly penetrate into the "core of the art of reality". It can be seen that the realist approach forms the foundation of realistic films, which, characterized by their unique perspectives, vivid plots and profound characterization, provide audiences with an opportunity to gain insight into the nature of society. They also encourage viewers to reflect on their own behaviors and beliefs, ultimately contributing to the development and progress of society. In recent years, film artists have continuously innovated and improved the research of films in this field, such as integrating commercial film features, new media and new elements such as animation on the basis of combining traditional culture, which has led to the vigorous development of films with this theme, and has become more and more popular with the audience. However, most of the studies are based on national films, and there is still a certain gap in the comparative study and cultural integration of realism-themed films from different countries. From the point of view of movie itself, it can be observed that since its inception, particularly in the 20th century, cinema has progressively evolved into a significant medium for cross-cultural communication [1]. As a comparative analysis of the same type of films between countries and regions, it can absorb the excellent achievements of different cultures

in a more comprehensive way. Therefore, this paper selects three films from different countries, and analyze them from the perspective of character development. The analysis will focus on the audiovisual styles, character changes, and plot contents in order to demonstrate the cultural characteristics and social problems faced by each country.

## 2. Analysis

The American film *The Joker*, released in 2019, is adapted from the super-villain character Joker in DC Comics, and this film depicts the story of Arthur, a struggling comedian in the 1980s, who gradually descends into a mental breakdown and embarks on a criminal career in Gotham City. Additionally, the Korean movie *Memories of Murder* follows the collaboration between two contrasting police officers as they investigate a case. The protagonists gradually approach the truth of the case by analyzing the clues in depth, but in the end, they regretfully fail to uncover the truth. Finally, there is the Chinese movie *Dying to Survive*, which is also adapted from real events. The movie tells the story of Cheng Yong who becomes the exclusive agent of the Indian generic drug "Ghrelin" in China. He takes on this role after receiving it from a male health product vendor who is unable to afford rent. Although the protagonists of the three films are flawed minor characters, the narration of their growth and change reflects societal issues from a different perspective [2].

### 2.1. The Joker

#### 2.1.1. Plot

Arthur, the protagonist of *The Joker*, suffers from mental illness and often receives strange stares due to his uncontrollable laughter, and he is a lonely and introverted character with no friends, facing the risk of losing his job. Additionally, he is a marginalized and forgotten by the society, struggling at the bottom of the social stratum. In the early part of the movie, the narrative of Arthur's real-life stress and mental illness is a prelude to his inability to distinguish between the real world and the world of fantasy, and at the same time, it shows Arthur's inability to find a sense of identity as he keeps switching between his "id" and "ego" [2].

After killing three bad guys on the subway and subsequently becoming a subject of interest and imitation, Arthur begins to recognize the significance of his own existence, which in turn contributes to the development of a more pronounced split in personality. "With each successive blow in real life, Arthur became increasingly detached from reality. The death of Yasso marked the birth of the clown, who came to symbolize the struggles of the underclass and their struggle for self-identity. This transformation can be seen as a sublimation of personality into the 'superego'."

#### 2.1.2. Filming Technique

The director uses color and audio-visual language to show the character's changes and contrasts in different worlds and different new ones. The fact that Arthur is completely orange at the beginning shows that Arthur has hope in life. However, after receiving many blows, the contrast and conflict between the colors orange and blue emerges as an outward expression of Arthur's inner struggle. With the increase of blue color, Arthur's rebellious personality is gradually formed.

In the audiovisual language, when Arthur is oppressed by the reality of life, he often adopts a bird's eye view, and the character is presented as a marginalized figure within society, overlooked and neglected. As well as representing Arthur's direction of vision the low perspective is used to illustrate emotional frustration and depression. In addition, some extreme overhead shots, or shots with a fence in the foreground indicate that the characters are imprisoned by real life. However, after Arthur decides to live in the fantasy world, the picture becomes bright and open, especially in the clip of

dancing on the steps, where the characters' dance movements are extremely stretchy, together with the slow-motion shots showing that the joker is very enjoyable and satisfied with himself in the fantasy world.

### 2.1.3. Social Issues and Cultural Characteristics

Through Arthur's changes, the movie reflects the social problems faced by America, including the gap between the rich and the poor, collective consciousness, and social discrimination. The rich show disregard and indifference in the face of the suffering of the poor. The underclass can't find a sense of identity, and can't find the direction and meaning of their endeavors in confusion. Society's misunderstanding of and stigma toward the mentally ill or the sick exacerbates the group's suffering.

Although the movie is structured in an unreal social environment, the problems faced by the marginalized groups in the plot are real. The image of the clown in the movie is not only a character image with unique charm, but also an important cultural symbol and sign of the times. The portrayal of the clown provides an important perspective for reflecting on social problems and exploring human nature, and the clown's resistance to social injustice, exploration of human nature and pursuit of freedom evoke varying degrees of resonance and psychological experiences in the audience. On the one hand, the madness and rebellion of the clown trigger the inner rebellion and uneasiness of the young people; on the other hand, the complexity and tragedy of the clown also trigger the audience to reflect more deeply on themselves and the society.

In addition, the film fully embodies the color of individual heroism in Western civilization. The United States is one of the most influential countries in the world, and its unique culture of heroism has influenced many countries. As a prominent symbol of its cultural influence abroad, "heroism" has unsurprisingly made its way into the film industry. The amalgamation of American individual heroism and cinematic art can be characterized by several key aspects: the pursuit of freedom and justice, a reverence for the aesthetics of violence, and an unwavering commitment to liberty. The aesthetics of violence against violence, the combination of freedom and contractual obligations, and the objectification of women as a means to elevate the hero. The development of the protagonist Arthur in *The Joker* is characterized by a progression from peace to division. After he discovers the truth of his tragic birth, his mother, colleagues, friends and girlfriend leave him one after another, but instead of succumbing to his destiny, he chooses to redeem himself to get away from the painful reality of the world. In the end, when he is fully immersed in his own fantasy world, he also becomes a symbol. The personal heroism conveyed by Arthur highlights the American concept of life and values [3].

## 2.2. Memories of Murder

### 2.2.1. Plot

In the movie *Memories of Murder*, the protagonist, Park Doo-man, is a criminal police officer in a small town in South Korea, who is in charge of the reconnaissance of this serial murder case. In the early part of the series, Park Doo-man acts in an absurdly brutal manner, making the viewers skeptical about the detection of this case, until the appearance of Seoul police officer So Tae-yoon and a new chief of the police department gradually put the order in the police station [4]. The two officers have apprehended three suspects, and as they collaborate on the case, their initial antagonism evolves into cooperation and rejection transforms into integration. However, each time they approach closer to the truth, reality presents them with even greater despair. The two police officers also continue to influence each other, as Park Doo-man moves from his initial outbursts to sanity and calmness, while So Tae-yoon moves from sanity in the beginning to anger and loss of control in the end. Both characters are lost to their former selves, which is sad and regrettable.

### 2.2.2. Filming Technique

The structure of the whole movie is very neatly divided, and the timing of each segment is properly grasped. In the whole story framework, the reasonable distribution of several suspects out of the plot content not only increases the drama and introduces new conflicts to drive the plot forward, but more importantly, it also prompts the audience to re-evaluate and reconstruct their logical thinking as they deepen their suspicions of the suspects. This gradual progression of suspense keeps the audience engaged and invested in the storyline. *Memories of Murder* is very much the director's personal characteristics, including metaphors and standpoints.

First of all, the metaphorical color in the film elaborates and paves the way for the social background in which it is located. For example, in the beginning, the children catching bugs and running in a line like a train in the field foreshadowed the prevalence and widespread nature of corruption in Korea. In addition, while Korea was under military dictatorship at the time, the industrialization process was world-renowned, but the Korean people suffered from both internal and external problems. This exacerbates the conflict between the people and the government and builds the undercurrent of the chaotic times of his time. Therefore, the factory becomes another metaphorical symbol in the movie [5].

The second aspect is the police station, as depicted in the panoramic view. The composition lacks a sense of balance, with both people and objects appearing haphazardly placed, creating a chaotic atmosphere. It will prompt the audience to start to question Park Doo-man's ability to solve this challenging criminal murder case within such an environment. Furthermore, it also refers to the chaotic state of old and new South Korea during that time period. After So Tae-yoon joins the investigation, he is initially positioned in the far corner of the backlot, emphasizing his isolation from the local police and his role as a bystander. But as the case develops, the camera begins to move slowly making So Tae-yoon single-handedly take center stage in the foreground, implying that So Tae-yoon will push for a reversal of the case and gradually become the dominant role of the reconnaissance team. Finally, there is the classic ending shot where Park Doo-man looks directly into the camera, which is the director's attempt to break the fourth wall between the actors and the audience. Through this shot, the film also expresses the deep core of the idea that Park Doo-man is not only looking at the murderer, but also at the evil soil that changed the people and gave birth to the devil.

Although the whole movie restores a real historical case, the core of it does not lie in the condemnation of the murderer, but the irony and reflection on that dark history, which is an extremely important warning for the development of Korea.

### 2.2.3. Social Problems

The film deeply reflects the social problems faced by Korea at that time through the development and changes of the two policemen. First of all, confusion in the judicial system, Detective Park initially locks the suspect on a mentally retarded boy, he blindly trusts in his intuition and decides that the boy is the murderer, and he even falsifies the evidence and resorts to violence in order to coerce the boy into confessing. These absurd claims and unprofessional behaviors epitomize the incompetence and lack of knowledge exhibited by police officers in handling cases during that era. The film epitomizes the ignorance of the police in that era. Secondly, the movie strongly reflects the social unrest of the times in South Korea, during which the country was under a military dictatorship and various resistance movements were brutally suppressed. South Korea was in a very turbulent social situation, providing the murderer with an opportunity to commit the crime. The director also implied multiple times in the film that the government was complicit in the murders. For example, on a rainy night, the police station urgently asked for forceful assistance, but the response was that all the manpower had been sent to suppress the case, which is the most intuitive illustration that when the people needed

the government's help the most, the government stood in opposition to the people. In the end, men dominated society. When the case reached a standstill, it was the policewoman who provided the key clue of the third suspect, thus propelling further development in the case, which shows that her intelligence and meticulousness, but despite her capabilities, she is limited to making coffee at the police station. The director of this plot is criticizing the male-dominated society, reflecting the low status of women in Korean society at that time [6].

#### 2.2.4. Cultural Characteristics

In Korean realism or reflecting the real history of the film, such as *Memories of Murder* and *12.12:THE DAY*, all reflect the social culture of Korea in the art of film. In both films, the director realistically restored the situation at that time and directly pointed out the shortcomings of Korean society through the means of plot and lines, and deeply criticized the government. Although a sharp and pointed approach is taken to hit the dark history or major social issues head-on, it has a positive impact on the development of society and a warning and reflective value to the government's work, which is a direct reflection of Korea's expositive attributes in this genre and the society's inclusiveness to films with this subject matter.

### 2.3. Dying to Survive

#### 2.3.1. Plot

In front of the audience, Cheng Yong, the protagonist of *Surviving Death*, is not a positive image. Through the portrayal of the middle-aged man, who lives in straitened circumstances, takes care of his sick father, and fights for his son's custody, the movie shows the audience the image of a selfish, mediocre, poor, but filial, middle-aged divorced man who loves his son in the midst of his predicament with a marketplace flavor. Such contradictory, three-dimensional, full-bodied and vivid characterization runs through the whole movie. The appearance of Lv Beneficiary brings a turnaround to Cheng Yong's life, who chooses to smuggle medicines in India for the sake of his life and interests, and in the meantime gets acquainted with the other key supporting characters in the movie and sets up his own team. Just when everything is going well for the agent's career, the appearance of Zhang Changlin, a fake drug dealer, forces Cheng Yong to give up this dangerous profession and disband the perfect team. A few years later, Cheng Yong, who has already had a successful career, chooses to smuggle drugs again after Lv Beneficiary chooses to commit suicide because of his intolerable illness, but this time he chooses to save the lives of more patients [7].

#### 2.3.2. Filming techniques

*Dying to Survive* exhibits distinct characteristics in its cinematography and narrative development. First of all, the color change portrays the innocent friendship. The film can be roughly divided into two colors, warm and cold. The opening scenes of the film are depicted in a yellow hue, creating a sense of tranquility and authenticity. As the plot progresses, the screen shifts from yellow to orange, representing desire, when Cheng Yong and a group of other people are also enjoying the material life after making money. The subsequent appearance of blue tones makes the plot enter a state of melancholy, and the director also tries to use cold colors to achieve harmony between the environment and the characters. At the end of the movie, Cheng is released from prison, mainly in a white tone, which symbolizes purity and sacredness. At this time, Cheng has saved many leukemia patients through his own efforts, and his life has been redeemed. Secondly, imagery objects interpret delicate emotions. In the movie, the director adopts many unique and novel props as imagery symbols to promote the development of the plot. For example, the mask metaphorically represents a mental break



and change, which is used to express the distance of the psychological relationship between the patient and Cheng. On Cheng's way to serve his sentence, the patients on the roadside spontaneously remove their masks, indicating that Cheng has won the respect and trust of the patients and rekindled their hope for life [8].

Lastly, in terms of plot advancement, the emergence of new characters builds a new world, and the change of attitude of the several supporting characters to Cheng Yong reflects his transformation from a human being to a "god". The movie is meticulous in its portrayal of the secondary characters, showing the different personalities of each of them, and demonstrating the love of life through the portrayal of their tenacious and resilient character. The supporting characters in the movie are all poor people at the bottom of the hierarchy, as well as a group of patients suffering from life's torment, but their hearts are still full of justice and love of life.

### 2.3.3. Social Problems

The movie deeply reflects the social problems faced by China, firstly, due to the large population, livelihood issues must be paid full attention to, and the people's visit to the doctor and medication is a large part of the expenses in life. Secondly, fake medicines disrupt the market and are likely to exacerbate the patient's condition, potentially causing delays in their recovery. This realistic movie focuses on portraying the kindness and compassion of the characters, creating "grassroots heroes". The more simple and unassuming the characters are, the more they can empathize with the public, and the social warmth that comes from ordinary people is widely accepted and recognized. As a film with realism theme, *I am not the God of Medicine* starts from caring about people's livelihood and public sentiment, and uses symbols, metaphors, imagery and other audio-visual techniques to three-dimensionally shape the characters, brilliantly interpreting the self-struggle and mutual support shown by a group of leukemia patients in the face of the contradiction between them and their medicines. Through the emotional expression of this special group, it breaks the public's indifference and stimulates society to discuss and think deeply about the real issues that the movie focuses on. After the movie was released, it attracted the attention of the national level to the anti-cancer drugs, and promoted the changes of the medical system, drug regulation and social assistance system, which fully demonstrated the positive influence of the realism theme movie on the society [9].

### 2.3.4. Cultural Characteristics

Since ancient times, China has advocated collectivism, believing that social development cannot be achieved without the unity and cooperation of its people. Combined with China's social structure and political characteristics, the idea of "the world is for the common good" contains the values of the proletariat and communism, which embodies the concept of "taking the collective interests of the people as the fundamental starting point", and is the core of the excellent traditional Chinese culture and moral spirit, and the core of the social justice system. The core of moral spirit is the highest principle of social public morality, the guideline for a socialist society to deal with the relationship between individual and society, individual and collective. Cheng Yong's character changes from division to harmony, fully reflecting the importance of collectivism in Chinese culture. In the movie, Cheng Yong's success cannot be separated from his team, in which everyone plays a very important role, and it is the appearance of these supporting characters that changes Cheng Yong's life and prompts him to make progress and growth. At the end of the film, Cheng Yong's role is elevated by the recognition and respect of his fellow patients, ultimately leading to his integration into society. Therefore, the strength of the team and the value of social identity shown in the movie fully convey the respect for collectivism in Chinese culture [10].

### 3. Conclusion

By comparing and analyzing the realist films *Joker*, *Memories of Murder* and *I Am Not the God of Medicine*, this paper summarizes the three films in terms of their audiovisual styles, changes in the characters as well as the social problems and cultural characteristics faced by different countries. After summarizing and analyzing, it is found that there is a common feature in the three films. The three imperfect protagonists are in different social environments, face different cultural backgrounds and life dilemmas, and make different changes under the influence of this, which reveals the social problems faced by the three countries to the greatest extent. All three films start from the perspective of marginalized characters, offering a reflection of the essence of their respective eras through their experiences. They depict the resilience and determination of these lower-class characters in facing adversity, as well as their outlook on life, evoking the profound emotions in audiences, and prompt them to contemplate human nature and the societal context in which they exist.

However, there are still some limitations in this paper. In the process of analyzing the realistic films of each country, only one film is selected respectively. Although these films are representative, they still present a one-sided view and cannot fully show all the cultural characteristics of their respective countries. In order to make up for the lack of this part, more films of the same genre will be selected for analysis in future research. A better understanding of the social concepts conveyed in the films can be achieved through understanding the history, seeking information, etc., so as to finally obtain a more comprehensive and profound summary, and contribute to the development of the realism-themed films as well as the integration of cultures of different countries.

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