

# ***Mirror reality, civilian hero and realistic reflection— On the "Real Aesthetics" of Dying to Survive***

**Fang Zhuxin**

*BeiJing Film Academy, XiTuCheng Street, China  
fangzhuxin2021@163.com*

**Keywords:** *Dying to Survive*, mirror aesthetics, noble character, audio visual language analysis, character image analysis.

**Abstract:** *Dying to Survive* is a representative work of real aesthetics, which portrays lofty characters and shows the reality of life with mirror images. In terms of audio-visual language, shaky shot shows the drift, rootlessness and helplessness of the inferior society; The hand-held lens shows a sense of reality of the whole picture; The flexible use of different scenes depicts the real characters and environment, and the combination of shots, color and light demonstrates the theme of film's realism. In the aspect of characterization, the five members of the leading role group and the outstanding supporting actors have laid the foundation for the film narrative, theme expression and frame construction, and promoted the development of film narrative.

## **1. Introduction**

The movie of “Dying to Survive” had attracted a large audience in the summer of 2018 with its touching theme, reality-based adaptation and exquisite story structure. The film performed excellent on its box office with more than 300 million Yuan. Besides, “Dying to Survive” also takes realistic works to a new level based on its great influence, strong appeal and a certain topicality. [1]

Undoubtedly, as a low-middle budget films, “Dying to Survive” has surpassed the outstanding achievements of its original positioning and production, and the results make people think deeply: what is the secret for medium and small cost films to achieve a blockbuster? How to create a work like “Dying to Survive” is a meaningful question for us to go into. [2]

On the other hand, economic contraction is unavoidable in China in the post-epidemic era. Thus, in order to control the risk, creating low-middle budget film should be a more suitable choice currently. As a represent, “Dying to Survive” undoubtedly demonstrates great practical significance: firstly, its creative ideas and methods would be a meaningful reference for other movie workers; secondly, its realism would be beneficial to the development, extension and re-expansion of the ecological territory of Chinese films.

Therefore, from the perspective of realism and the particularity of film production in the post epidemic era, [3] it has great significance of the times, reality and practice to re-examine, interpret and analyze this “popular-praise” work in 2018.

## **2. Lens reality Aesthetics: Panoramic drawing of real society**

Film is an audio-visual art, the motion can illustrate the theme and thought that the film wants to structure, also can reflect the emotion that the director wants to express. [4]"I'm not the God of medicine" can be regarded as a pioneer in Chinese realistic movies: it takes into account both commercial and artistic, industrial and aesthetic. The director focuses on the real society and the ordinary citizens, which is not only demonstrates the real social life, but also reveals to the audience some social problems, such as "difficulty to see a doctor", "difficulty to buy medicine" and the relationship among people. The director integrates the real life into his artistic creation and presents the "real life" to the audience by using the panoramic method.[5]

### **2.1. "bottom presentation" under the Shaking mirror language and hand held lens**

#### **2.1.1. Reality under the shaky shot: helplessness and wandering**

In "I'm not the God of medicine", the lens presents the audience with a sense of reality (bottom anxiety, middle-aged crisis, etc.), [6]and provides a reference style for the creation of Chinese follow-up realistic films.

In terms of visual language, the director uses a large number of shaking lens in specific scenes, which shows audiences the chaos and disorder about the life of the low-level citizens , so that the audience can be brought into a specific situation, then relate to the story.[7]

First of all, the pan shows a real living environment of the inferior society. For example, when "Huangmao" Peng Hao and Cheng Yong met for the first time, which is the scene he robbed Cheng Yong of the cheap drugs smuggled from India, Cheng Yong, LV Yingyi and Peng Hao staged a fierce chase scene. The director used a lot of shaking lens and fast cutting in this clip, which made the audience nervous.[8] At the same time, this series of shaking shots also truly show the living environment of the protagonist, such as dirty streets, dilapidated cars, crisscrossed and complicated paths, etc. From drag racing to catching up, and then pushing Peng Hao to the ground, the camera switches constantly between the characters. With the continuous switching of medium and close range, the audience also be put into a God perspective, which is accompanied with the switching of the characters' perspectives.[9] In this way, the screen of the film makes the audience achieve an experience of the real life about the protagonist.

Secondly, shaky shot is the embodiment of wandering feeling and reality helplessness. In the film, the main object are those nobody in the real life , they have their own difficulties and helplessness, the use of shake lens convey the theme more effectively. In the beginning part of the movie, the protagonist, because of his father's illness, once again falls into a more serious dilemma after his wife's divorce with him and his son is going to be taken away by his ex-wife. At this time, the camera lens turns from outside of the car to the inside with a sense of turbulence. This visual creation expresses Cheng Yong's pain, entanglement and helplessness.[10]

#### **2.1.2. Hand-held lens: show the reality, present "contradiction", and increase the "tension" atmosphere of the film**

In the process of creation, the director adopts hand-held lens for showing the real life of the people from inferior society and simulating the perception of people's eyes when they see things, making the picture of the film more authentic and credible, in order to resonate the audience's sense of identity for the plot and characters in the film.[11]

The film's Photography Guide once said in an interview that "we should keep up with the characters in the lens. I hope the lens could breathe with the actors and capture all the details of the actors.". In the movie, after solving the problem of "can't afford medicine", the plot is pushed to the

climax by another conflict - the fake drug dealer's medicine makes the patients get ill, and a large "lecture" is held. Out of his concern and sympathy for his patients and his compassion for the people as a member of Christianity, pastor Liu stepped forward to prevent the "fake drug dealer" from misbehaving, but he was attacked by others.[12] At this time, the five people who have formed a small group are led by Huang Mao. At this time, the film uses a large number of hand-held lens to show the reality of the scene, the reality of the story, and the fierce contradiction - Hand-held lens makes the lens language more in line with the chaotic scene and the mood of the audience, intensifies the contradiction, and promotes the development of the subsequent plot.

However, hand-held lens should not be overused. That is because when audience are watching a movie, they need to get a better visual experience. The use of some hand-held lenses in this film disrupts the aesthetic experience of the audience. Sometimes, the hand-held lenses in this film make the screen feel be cut and split, and then make the audience feel dizzy when watching the film. [13]The original intention of hand-held lens is good, but film creators should choose the appropriate range and frequency of shaking, especially in the pursuit of commercial aspects.

## **2.2. Social "true expression" and "appearance presentation" in the context of "special"**

Scene presentation is conducive to the expression of the form of the work "I'm not a god of medicine" uses a lot of close range, which shows the director's ability to grasp the real society, and better shows the emotions of the characters and the relationship between each character. Perspective and panorama are rarely used, and there are only a few places where the whole film appears.[14]

### **2.2.1. Vision: the "image expression" and "metaphor of scene change" in the real inferior society.**

The long-range lens is generally used to show more grand scenes, present the social environment potentially, and it can also demonstrates the relationship between people and environment, between people and the scene.

On the one hand, the film presents the real situation of society by using long-range lens. When Cheng Yong went to India to buy pirated drugs in order to earn money, the director choose the big vision lens to show the social appearance of India.[15]

On the other hand, the long-range lens of the film also has a metaphorical effect. Compared with the close range and medium range of the hero's living place at the beginning of the film, the big vision when he went to India has bright color and broad vision, which has a visual effect from small to large, from embarrassment to "enlightened". At the same time, in fact, this visual change also implies a good life and the coming of hope, which means that white blood patients will gain a new life because of the alternative drugs brought back by Cheng Yong.

### **2.2.2. Close shot and medium shot: the presentation of real details and the expression of emotion and relationship of the people at the bottom.**

The important characteristic of realistic movies is the realism of the screen, besides, the audience should be able to feel it. Therefore, close range can show the emotions and actions of characters very skillfully.

Firstly, the close and middle view can show the emotional changes of the characters, and can present real details. When Lu Shouyi seeing Cheng Yong for smuggling drugs in India for the first time, and the two people in the dialogue were captured in a very good position. As the requester, Lu's face was flattering, while Cheng Yong was more impatient. In the display of the relationship between the characters, Zhongjing depicts the relationship between them vividly. Chengyong is

impatient and distrust all the time. After refusing Lu's request, Cheng Yong sits down on his own, while Lu stands at his counter and leaves his phone with flattering laughs.

Secondly, close shot and medium shot can skillfully show the relationship and emotion between the characters, and make the audience feel the same. On the one hand, the mid shot better depicts the relationship between LV You Yi and Cheng Yong in the plot where LV You Yi and Cheng Yong intersect for the first time. LV You Yi's low attitude is a kind of "asking for others", which shows us the helplessness of the characters. On the other hand, the middle and close range also depicts their emotions, and LV Yingyi's eyes, movements and expressions are depicted and displayed in detail.

### **3. Character construction, theme presentation and narrative promotion: the logic behind the story of hero's growth**

Characters are the core of screenplay creation. The different choices created by their personality traits, living environment and difficulties will affect the development of the plot and the construction of the overall framework, and also make the presentation of the film theme embodied in the characters themselves. "I'm not the God of medicine" creates a very distinctive and personalized leading role group and some brilliant supporting roles, which lays the foundation for the structure of the film framework and the social problems that the film needs to reveal. The characterization of *Dying to Survive* exposes the contradictions one by one, promotes the narrative of the film, and combines the artistic color, social value and commercial nature of the film. It is an innovation of Chinese film on the creation of realistic themes.

#### **3.1. Main characters group: the way of "hero growth" of civilian team**

The film *I'm not the God of medicine* based on the reality adapts the prototype character Lu Yong into Cheng Yong. In order to highlight the contradiction and produce dramatic conflict, the original one person is changed into a team (a leading role team composed of five people). This kind of character setting makes the plot of the film more dimensional, and each character has its own special task and mission.

##### **3.1.1. Cheng Yong: from self to superego**

First, shadow bias has shaped a "small citizen" image, and shows the selfish, idealistic and other behaviors of the small citizens. Cheng Yong, as the main object of the whole film narrative, has undergone qualitative changes in character at the beginning and end of the film. At the beginning of the film, Cheng Yong is a typical image of the small citizens at the bottom, and is a class isolated from the society and is in the lowest level of life. The biggest secret to shaping and revealing characters is to keep pushing characters into the desperate situation. Only the characters in the dilemma have a play, and they can complete the shaping of their own image in the conflict of overcoming the difficulties. "He divorced, quarreled, was urged by the landlord for his poor shop operation, and faced with a lot of money he needed to get his father to hospital.

It is such a dilemma that makes Cheng Yong embark on the road of smuggling generic drugs. The dramatic conflict thus produces, promotes the development of the plot, makes the character more three-dimensional, and shows his concern of his family, but also mercenary.

In the first part of the film, the director magnifies Cheng Yong's shortcomings and portrays him as a person only for money and interests. Even if he goes to India to bring back "generic drugs", he is just because "I don't want to be a savior, I want to make money.". He is slovenly, impatient, and even has a tendency of domestic violence. After his success in selling drugs, he paid a lot of money for Liu Sihui in the bar to revenge his former manager. It seems to maintain fairness and justice, but

in fact it shows Cheng Yong's idea that money only values money and money can solve all problems.

Secondly, the film makes Cheng Yong a person who is afraid of "authority", which lays the foundation for later becoming a "hero". In the middle of the film, Cheng Yong makes a lot of money by selling fake drugs, and the protagonist is in the dilemma of whether to quit drug smuggling or not because there is a series of contradiction around him, the fake drug dealer Zhang Changlin. As a realistic film, the creator should pay more attention to the authenticity of characters rather than specific black and white or right and wrong, instead, they should pursue to show people regardless of good and evil. Therefore, out of consideration of the reality of the law, Cheng Yong decided to give up selling drugs and give them to the fake drug dealers. He chose to withdraw with money, and the leading group fell apart. For this reason, the other four people can't understand Cheng Yong's choice, but in fact, it is Cheng Yong's psychological exploration for the present. He brings social law into the scope of thinking, and shows the changes of characters' needs in the process of development. The film creators did not criticize the behavior of the characters, because people are not gods, the current choice is not wrong, just the stage of growth.

Finally, the film changes Cheng Yong from selfish and timid to a brave and resolute "savior", which makes the protagonist complete his "growth" and makes the audience resonate. In the later stage of the movie, as Cheng Yong's friend LV's illness worsens, he once again chose the road of smuggling drugs, and LV's death is the key element of his growth. At this last stage, Cheng Yong turned to the moral level, and really began to pay attention to the living environment of white blood patients. He became a representative who helped the dyings for nothing. This is Cheng Yong's self salvation road after his internal rest. Under the great pressure of the police tracking down the counterfeit drug market and the possible closure of the pharmaceutical factory, he still chose to smuggle drugs at risk, and did not consider his own economic interests at all - he even put in the money earned by the factory upside down, and finally became the incarnation of the "God of medicine" given away by thousands of people when he was in prison.

### **3.1.2.LV shouyi: the "moderator" to promote narrative and team**

LV is an important member of the leading role group and essential to promote the narrative of the film. He is the first person to meet the protagonist. At the beginning of the movie, he finds Cheng Yong and asks him to help him smuggle drugs from India, because he "waits for drugs to save his life" - which is one of the reasons why Cheng Yong chooses to smuggle generic drugs.

Compared with the other three people, the character image of LV Yingyi is the most three-dimensional.

On the one hand, he is a bit of smoothy and weak. When his patient opposed Lenin, he sat on the steps eating a box lunch with a self mocking smile on his face. Because he understands that such demonstrations can only be formalized and superficial, and can not solve practical problems. He is habitual to please others. He has a very low attitude when asking for help and medicine. He is good at making ends meet and is a good man in the team.

On the other hand, he is tolerant, generous and considerate. LV Yingyi can almost understand every choice made by Cheng Yong. When the leading role group collapsed because of Cheng Yong's withdrawal, he neither crushed the cup like Huang Mao and left, nor was he indignant. He thought that Cheng Yong had the obligation to help them. He just tried to win over the others and asked Cheng Yong if he had drunk too much. After learning Cheng Yongding's mind, he no longer entangles, but turns around and leaves. In this scene, he is always at the low point of the picture, everyone's perspective is overlooking him, showing the role of LV Yingyi as a "moderator" in the team.



In the film, LV Yingyi is a person who is not afraid of death, but also full of hope for life. On the one hand, he knows his own situation but does not abandon himself; on the other hand, he is responsible for his family and his son, and has the responsibility to hope for life: at the beginning, LV Yingyi wanted to choose death, because leukemia is very painful and the price of medicine is extremely high, so he did not want to drag down his family. But the birth of his son made him gain hope again. He found Cheng Yong's cheap drugs and found the confidence to live. In the middle of the movie, he is always very happy. He also takes Cheng Yong back to his home for dinner, and appreciates his actions bringing vitality to his family. When the movie goes to the middle and late stage, because there are no cheap drugs, his condition get worse, chemotherapy brings him great pain, and endless medical expenses crush him. Thus his inevitable outcome is to return to the beginning and go to death. It is his death that inspires Cheng Yong to think about the true meaning of life, pushes the plot to a climax, and pushes Cheng Yong to the road of "medicine God".

To sum up, as an individual, LV Yingyi shows his own distinctive character. As a member of the group of patients with white blood, LV Yingyi reflects their common characteristics.

"I'm not the God of medicine" was adapted from Lu Yong, who transferred his identity as a white blood patient to LV Yingyi. This group is lack of care, their drug demand is far higher than their own conditions, they can only wait to die if they have no medicine to eat.

In a word, LV Yingyi is a person struggling between disease and life, which can make the audience's sympathy have a foothold. The film creates many difficulties for him, which makes the audience project their emotions on him and resonate with him.

### **3.2. Supporting role: the depiction of Quanzhen life and the presentation of three dimensional human nature**

A film needs to reveal social problems from multiple perspectives. Showing social problems cannot do without the support of supporting actors. Supporting roles provide more possibilities for the film to explore the reality. And a brilliant supporting role can stimulate the audience's identity, make the film structure more complete, or stimulate contradictions, or promote the plot, and serve for the film narrative.

#### **3.2.1. Cao Bin: the "sublime" interwoven with human nature and society**

The characters need to be connected by social relations. As the opposite of Cheng Yong's drug smuggling in the film, police Cao Bin is undoubtedly an important supporting role. His identity not only represents the police, but also the younger brother of Cheng Yong's ex-wife.

On the one hand, Cao Bin, the younger brother of Chengyong's ex-wife, was full of disdain and disgust at the beginning of the film. With the development of the plot, Cheng Yong has changed, and Cao Bin's attitude has changed accordingly, and he began to identify and support Cheng Yong.

At the beginning of the film, Cao Bin, as the younger brother of Chengyong's ex-wife, has always looked down on the family violence and incompetent Chengyong. But in the process of chasing the fake drug dealer, he gradually found that Chengyong was not in consideration of his own interests, instead, he was only trying to relieve the white blood patients who can not afford the medicine. Then Cao Bin began to change his view on Cheng Yong. What had the most important impact on him was that they brought back a group of ordinary people who bought generic drugs. An old lady took his hand and asked him, "who can meet a patient in the family?" "Can you make sure you're not sick all your life?" , then the lens turned, Cao Bin stood in front of the pool and wet all his hair. The image in the mirror was initially covered up until Cao Bin let his police let the people go, and the lens gradually turned to Cao Bin in the mirror - which is the embodiment of his real self. The law in reality made him have to abide by, but the illusion in the mirror tells him what is true.

In the last stage of the movie, Cao Bin's radical change happened after Huang Mao died in a car accident, he knelt down on the ground holding Huang Mao. After Cheng Yong asked him, "what's the crime of trying to live?" he was suppressed on the wall without any resistance and did not say a word. Then he went to the police chief to show his attitude. He would rather accept punishment than accept the case, and gradually agreed with him. Sister's ex-husband is the protagonist Cheng Yong reconciliation. After Cheng Yong was pounced to be guilty, he promised to tell Cheng Yong's son that his father was a good man. After he got out of prison, he came to pick him up with Cheng Yong, which is just an illustration of his attitude change. This is the character's final choice in the current of reality. Cao Bin chose that humanity are greater than legal principles, and the role has been sublimated, which also makes the image more popular and becomes one of the indispensable roles in the whole film. He represents the party that most people in society are willing to choose, that is, the public servant who cares about the real suffering of the masses, rather than the superior judge.

On the other hand, as a police officer, he represents the legal side, social norms, which requires accountability of generic pharmaceutical market, which is to some extent the resistance to the protagonist. For example, the police chief who was portrayed in the film has been abiding by the law and asked Cao Bin to solve the case as soon as possible. Because "we, as law enforcement agents, are going to be on the side of the law.". But Cao Bin chose a different way, rather than accepting punishment, he should integrate the feelings into serious law, convey the human feelings of law and the concern of law enforcement officials for the people. In the choice of social morality and law, Cao Bin finally chose to care for the people, and concentrated the theme of the film intention to express the government's concern about reality and the sufferings of the people, sublimated the main purpose.

### **3.2.2. Swiss medical representative: a "fuel dispenser" to promote the image of the leading role**

On the one hand, the representative of the pharmaceutical company is the "villain" in the film, opposite to the leading group. For the consideration of social reality and national conditions, the director sets the opposite side of the film as a pharmaceutical company, while the pharmaceutical company is concentrated on one person, which forms a typical binary opposition in the film. From the beginning to the end, the representative of medicine is an elite figure with suit, tie and glasses. He is ruthless and does not know the suffering of the sick people. He always claims that generic drugs are counterfeit drugs and will cause damage to human body, and spare no effort to crack down on generic drugs. In the film, he appeared as a villain, became the outlet of the audience and the people in the film, and created a dramatic conflict.

On the other hand, the establishment of the "villain" of medical representatives reduces the authenticity in real life, and the too absolute binary opposition also makes the characters thin. Considering the reality, pharmaceutical companies have the right to sue generic drugs, and the process of drug development and production is extremely long term. In the later stage, it needs a long time to go on the market, and countless efforts have been put into it to develop effective drugs to inhibit diseases. Therefore, the high price of drugs at the beginning is justifiable rather than heinous. The director portrays it as a character with only shortcomings but no flash point, showing its dark side blindly, which is not in line with the response of realistic movies to the real reality. The representative of medicine has become a stereotyped character, only for the plot service, but did not establish a three-dimensional character, which is an unfinished part of the film.

## 4. Conclusion

Among the films adapted from real events, "I'm not the God of medicine" has provided a lot of experience for the creation of Chinese realistic films, and it is an excellent text in the field of film creation in recent years. It not only uses the shooting technique of "new realism" freely, but also innovates the paradigm of realistic movies, integrates dramatic conflicts into the film narrative, depicts the deeply rooted roles, and shows the profound thinking of social problems.

"I'm not the God of medicine" depicts a real picture of the life of inferior society for the audience. The leading role groups have different social roles, which is better to reveal the problems existed in the society and the struggle and efforts made by the little people at the bottom to live.

This film can arouse the audience's empathy for the role experience in the play, which shows the success of its creation. "To establish the value concept and value orientation of people-oriented and people first, and to pay attention to the national economy and people's livelihood, especially the people's livelihood, is the first essence of realistic films."

Therefore, nowadays in China, creators should pay attention to the combination of commerciality and artistry, try to increase the elements of dramatic conflict and artistic processing on the basis of showing truly social life, and push realistic films to a broader market, so that the audience can more easily understand the theme and think or make changes.

Through the public feedback of the film, the audience shows a good acceptance for the realistic films. Therefore, the film workers should hold hope for such films, and create more excellent realistic films, especially focusing on showing social life and facing the future.

As a form of artistic creation that be accepted by more and more people, film should not only convey the creator's ideas, but also pay attention to the needs of the audience. Therefore, realistic films should not only show the dark side of society blindly, but also has a responsibility to create beauty, give people hope, and promote the progress and development of society.

## Reference

- [1] Dong Huichuan, Chen Weini. *Politics of dignity, The Path of Redemption, contrast Aesthetics -- The Aesthetic Breakthrough of Dying to Survive* [J]. *Writers World*, 2021(15):3-4.
- [2] Li Hu. *The Conflict and Coordination between law and Morality from the film Dying to Survive* [J]. *Legal Expo*, 2021(13):151-152.
- [3] Rao SHUguang. *Realistic Background color and Type Strategy: Comments on Dying to Survive* [J]. *Contemporary Film*, 2018(08):21-23.
- [4] Zheng Yang. *Dying to Survive: The Tension of Tragicomedy in Realistic Film* [N]. *China Art News*, 2018-07-09(006).
- [5] Zhang Anhua. *On the Characteristics of Realistic Films from Dying to Survive* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2018(19):82-84.
- [6] Yang Hong, Wang Yanshan. *On the Human construction of "Superego" in Dying to Survive* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2018(19):79-81.
- [7] Cao Jian. *Humanistic Thoughts on Realistic Themes -- Taking dying to Survive as an example* [J]. *Art Research*, 2019(03):84-85.
- [8] Guilin. *Commercial Imagination of Domestic Realistic Films -- from Dear to Dying to Survive* [J]. *Chinese Literature and Art Review*, 2018(10):30-37.
- [9] Xu Chunshu. *Analysis of the Popularity of Dying to Survive* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2018(23):140-143.
- [10] Li Xiaojing, LI Qingchen. *Narrate analysis of the film Dying to Survive* [J]. *House of Drama*, 2018(33):100+102.
- [11] Wang Lijun, Kang Chao. *Dying to Survive: Aesthetic Presentation of pure facts* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2018(18):106-107.
- [12] Liang Hui. *Dying to Survive and The Renewal of Realistic Film Paradigm* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2018(19):85-87.
- [13] Chen Xianyong, Wu Baohong. *The Dilemma and Breakthrough of film Realism under the Background of Commercialization -- Cultural Interpretation of Dying to Survive* [J]. *Film Literature*, 2018(21):100-102.
- [14] Huang Xiutai, Zhang Li. *The application and satisfaction theory analysis of the film dying to survive* [J]. *Today's media*, 2019, 27(06):94-96.
- [15] Sun Jing. *Dying to Survive: Disease representation and social writing* [J]. *Art Review*, 2018(08):72-80.