

Analysis of the Disease Narrative Strategy in “Dying to Survive”

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Abstract: In 2018, the movie *Dying to Survive*, adapted from real-life events, was released. Focusing on the two core elements of "medicine" and "disease", the film achieved great success both in box office and word-of-mouth. This paper aims to deeply analyze the unique charm of *Dying to Survive* from the perspective of disease narrative strategy. By carefully interpreting the plot and visual presentation in the film, this paper will explore the subtlety of the film's narrative strategy, and further reveal the strategies and techniques of disease narrative in modern realistic-themed movies, providing useful references and inspirations for the research of disease narrative.

Keywords: Disease Narrative, Dying to Survive, Narrative Strategy.

1. Introduction

In recent years, realistic-themed film and television works have emerged in large numbers and become the focus of audience attention. Among them, medical-themed film and television dramas, due to their high degree of correspondence with real life, have deeply explored the health crises and ethical dilemmas triggered by “disease”. On July 5, 2018, “Dying to Survive”, directed by Wen Muye, was released in China. Based on real events, this film focuses on the core issues of “medicine” and “disease”. It not only won a good reputation with a high score of 9.0 on Douban but also achieved a box office success of 3.07 billion yuan, becoming a dark horse in the summer movie season.

The disease narrative strategy of “Dying to Survive” plays a crucial role in its sensation in the cinema. The film focuses on the social hot topic of healthcare, deeply analyzes the sharp contradictions such as social status and medical costs, and shows the hardships and helplessness of the patient group. At the same time, the film also makes bold innovations in artistic techniques, skillfully integrating Wen Muye's consistent narrative tone with Ning Hao's “gray humor” and Xu Zheng's “Lost” series of nonsensical styles, forming an emotional writing style that combines humor and seriousness in a well-balanced way. This unique narrative strategy not only deeply reveals the dark corners and problems in the medical field but also provides a reasonable outlook for the gradual improvement of the new medical system, offering new ideas and inspirations for the creation of domestic realistic-themed films.

2. Causal Linear Structure

Linear narrative follows the chronological sequence of the story, aiming to construct the coherence and integrity of the story. The movie “Dying to Survive” takes the protagonist Cheng Yong's three trips to India as the main line. Each trip carries different purposes and profound meanings. On his first trip to India, Cheng Yong was driven by financial difficulties. Facing the breakdown of his family and the high medical expenses for his father, he knew that this trip involved illegal activities but still resolutely embarked on the journey. The

second trip to India was to save the life of his good friend Lu Shouyi. Although he ultimately failed, this deep friendship is truly touching. And on the third trip to India, Cheng Yong did it for the hope of survival of more patients. He firmly decided to sell the medicine at a price lower than the cost, just to help those patients who couldn't afford the high medicine fees and let them see the dawn of life.

Linear narrative not only emphasizes the causal dramatic conflicts but also pursues a closed-end finale. “Dying to Survive” follows the “three-act” narrative structure. Although its strong commercial and genre characteristics are somewhat lacking in artistic exploration, this clear structure of beginning, development, and conclusion makes it easy for the audience to understand the development of the plot. The film presents the serious social issue of “sky-high medicine prices” to the audience in a popular and accessible way, triggering extensive attention and discussion, and even having a far-reaching social impact. This is exactly the unique charm of commercial genre films, and it is also the result of the director's skillful balance between the entertainment, sociality, and spirituality of the film.

3. The Flow of Space and Time

Film, as an art form that integrates time and space, the construction of its narrative time and space is crucial for the narrative of the film, which is also a significant feature that distinguishes film from other art forms such as literature, fine arts, and music. In disease narrative films, the unique handling of narrative space and time can make the audience have a deeper understanding of the situation of patients. Usually, when a disease strikes, the struggle between life and disease mostly takes place in closed spaces such as hospital consulting rooms, operating rooms, or wards, and patients are often “isolated” in these places. However, “Dying to Survive” breaks this convention and shows the passage of time and the transformation of space.

The story of the film “Dying to Survive” is set in 2002. Through details such as the characters' clothing, the style of buildings, and the means of transportation, it subtly reflects the passage and changes of time. The director also deliberately gives a close-up of the RMB. The alternation of

new and old banknotes further clarifies the time background of the story. The film is divided into two time nodes: the first node is 2002, and the second node takes Lu Shouyi's critical illness as a turning point, and the time jumps to one year later. Such a time setting makes the narrative of the film more compact and powerful.

"Space and time markers are integrated in a recognized specific whole. Time markers should be displayed in space, and space should be understood and measured through time. The intersection of these different series and the integration of different markers are the characteristics of the artistic spatio-temporal complex." The space in the film is not just the geographical location where the characters move, but also contains deep metaphors. Realistic-themed films are often based on real life, and the shooting locations of "Dying to Survive" span China and India, expanding the narrative space to an international context. For example, when Cheng Yong first enters India, the picture shows the hustle and chaos of the daily life in the Indian market, and the dilapidated appearance of the streets reflects the lag of India's economic development from the side. When he enters India again, the streets in the picture are still dilapidated and filled with smoke. This fairyland-like visual effect metaphorizes Cheng Yong's confusion and helplessness in the face of death. In addition, the places where Cheng Yong has dinner with his son and entertains Lu Shouyi are both selected in snack shops. This not only reflects Cheng Yong's financial difficulties but also deepens the audience's understanding of the characters' situations through the detailed depiction of the space.

4. Literature References

Aristotle defined tragedy as: "The imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." Disease, often regarded as the tragic core element, is presented in a rather unusual way in some films -through a light comedy or a style combining sadness and joy, to reduce the heaviness and cruelty brought by the disease. This way of handling is particularly evident in the plot design, character lines, and behavioral expressions of the film. It is not only a commercial consideration for market demand but also reflects the unique views of the creators on disease and the attitude towards life.

In the film "Dying to Survive", the humorous comedy style in the first half is particularly prominent. From the Indian song Burning Love full of exotic charm at the beginning of the film, to Cheng Yong's "Prince God Oil" (whose effect is jokingly compared to Viagra), to the jokes caused by the language barrier when Cheng Yong communicates with the Indians about smuggling by sea, and the funny scene where the five-person team makes a scene at the site where Zhang Changlin sells fake medicines, every detail is full of humor and joy. These humorous elements are not just for the sake of eliciting laughter but present the truth and vividness of life in a relaxed and humorous way, regulating the atmosphere of the film, and at the same time, deeply satirizing social issues. For example, the dance manager's pole dancing under the temptation of money, Zhang Changlin's hypocritical posture when boasting about the fake medicine, and the old woman's lines like an advertisement skill are all full of satirical meaning and thought-provoking.

However, there is an obvious change in the style in the

second half of the film, and the narrative gradually inclines towards a serious drama. The audience witnesses Cheng Yong's difficult choice between illegal smuggling and moral perseverance, and feels the struggle and pain of Police Officer Cao between human feelings and the law. The old woman's tearful question "Can you guarantee that you won't get sick for the rest of your life?" and Zhang Changlin's incisive words "There is only one disease in this world, the disease of poverty" all touch on profound social and life issues, triggering the audience's resonance and reflection. The successive deaths of Lu Shouyi and Peng Hao add a strong tragic color to the film, making the audience feel the fragility and preciousness of life through tears.

In the ending part of the film, Cheng Yong's expectation for medical improvement in court, the touching scene of thousands of people seeing him off on his way to prison, and the lyrics and melody of the ending song Dust in the Wind that strike the heart directly convey positive mainstream values in a lyrical and solemn way. These elements not only bring the film to a successful conclusion but also let the audience see hope and strength through tears.

"Dying to Survive" focuses on the social issue of "sky-high medicine prices" and deeply touches on three of the four major themes of human life, namely "birth", "disease", and "death", which has strong social significance. To convey the profound ideological core of the film to the audience, Wen Muye believes that the key lies in establishing a close emotional resonance with the audience: "I have always believed that laughter and tears are the keys for the audience to receive the film. If you laugh and cry, you will be able to listen to the truth I'm telling." He skillfully uses the techniques of laughter and tears to express the theme of disease, making the audience feel the beauty and warmth of life in laughter and the fragility and preciousness of life in tears. The light humor in the first half of the film paves the way for the display of profound emotional values in the second half. The audience is gradually guided into the carefully constructed film world by the director through laughter and tears, which is also the profound intention of the director's use of the combination of laughter and tears to explore the theme of disease.

5. Conclusion

The disease narrative in "Dying to Survive", through ingenious arrangements, has successfully transformed a seemingly ordinary disease story into an artistic work that deeply reflects social reality and the brilliance of human nature. The application of this narrative strategy not only enriches the connotation and expressiveness of the film but also stimulates the audience's in-depth thinking on multiple levels such as life, morality, and society, greatly sublimating the value of the work. As Jin Danyuan said in Introduction to Film Aesthetics, when considering commercial factors, film narrative still cannot deviate from the truth of life. And "Dying to Survive" is exactly such an excellent work that has both commercial value and deeply reflects social reality. It captures the brilliance and darkness of human nature with the camera and conveys warmth and hope through the story, allowing the audience to receive a spiritual baptism in the process of being moved and thinking.

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