

The Aesthetics of Death in the Japanese Film "Love Letter"

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Abstract. The Japanese film "Love Letter" deeply explores death and its interweaving with love, revealing human emotions and cultural attitudes towards death. Director Junji Iwai skillfully manipulated the themes of memory, longing, and acceptance through the roles of Hiroko and Shuki Fujii, inviting the audience to contemplate existential issues regarding the meaning and purpose of life. Through a non-linear narrative structure, this film delves into the eternal essence of love, even in death. Memories of past love and connections with deceased loved ones catalyze emotional reflection and growth, highlighting the irreversible interconnection between time and life. In addition, cultural values such as "one ear unconsciousness" and beliefs surrounding death shape a portrayal of love and death. Although the exploration of love and death has triggered profound emotional reactions and philosophical contemplation, it has also raised people's awareness of challenges such as idealizing sadness and reinforcing stereotypes. To maintain a positive impact, the authenticity and depth of narrative descriptions should be given priority, while having different perspectives on love and death. In managing love and loss, efforts should also focus on promoting autonomy, happiness, and personal growth, while providing resources on healthy relationship dynamics and cultural backgrounds. Essentially, "Love Letter" explores the aesthetics of death in Japanese films, prompting viewers to reflect on their experiences and perspectives, and deepening their understanding of the eternal nature of human nature and love.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Death, Japanese Film, Cultural Attitudes.

1. Introduction

Until now, death has always been a theme that people ponder and explore repeatedly, and this aesthetic exploration is extremely strong in the Japanese film industry. The exploration of death culture in numerous movies presents a rich and colorful trend, which includes both reverence for tradition and contemplation and exploration of the meaning of life. This article uses the movie "Love Letter" as a representative example to explore director Junji Iwai's reflection on the meaning of death and some traditional life concepts reflected in the movie.

The movie tells the story of Hiroko Watanabe (played by Mizuo Nakayama) living in Kobe. After attending a memorial service for his fiancé Fujii Shuki, who died in a mountain disaster, he returns to his fiancé's home. At the invitation of his fiancé's mother, he checks his fiancé's graduation album from Tokugawa High School and sends a letter to Otaru, who lives at Fujii Shuki High School, out of longing. Unexpectedly, a few days later, the letter was received by Fujii Shuki, a girl with the same name and surname as her fiancé, who was also a high school classmate. Out of curiosity, Hiroko Watanabe explored the story of their first love with female Fujii but found that he was probably the replacement of female Fujii because they had the same appearance. This movie has won excellent awards such as the Monument Award at the Montreal Film Festival and the Outstanding Works Award at the 19th Japan Film Awards.

Fear of death is an instinct possessed by all living beings, but for humans, facing death often generates more complex and intriguing emotions. Different communities and cultural backgrounds have different perspectives and emotions on the thinking of life and death. Japan is such a country that is closely related to death, such as the suicide rituals possessed by samurai and the large number of deaths in World War II, all of which indicate that this society needs to face more thinking about death. The thinking of Japanese people born from these histories has formed a unique Japanese aesthetic of death. "Love Letter" is a movie with a strong Japanese cultural background, even if it

does not directly describe death, the entire story is shrouded in a faint atmosphere of death. The exploration of the article provides a platform for readers to contemplate existential issues surrounding the meaning and purpose of life. By facing the inevitability of death, it prompts the audience to reflect on their values, desires, and priorities. When trying to deal with the depiction of death in Japanese movies, the audience reflects on their own death, prompting them to reflect and potentially catalyze personal growth and reflection. At the same time, the audience can gain a deeper understanding of human emotions towards death, explore the challenges of love and death, and have someone help us think more deeply about our own value in life. Although there are many scholars studying this field, few have conducted research and analysis on the death aesthetics of targeted Japanese films.

2. literature Review

"Love Letter" has had a significant impact on the international film industry with its poignant story and excellent photography skills. Many scholars use it as an example to study the concept of death conveyed in its narrative. According to Anastasiya Savin's analysis, "Love Letter" adopts two parallel storylines, with Hiroko and Fujii as the main characters. Hiroko recalled her late fiancé, while Fujii told the story of him and his father suffering from the same illness. This non-linear narrative interweaves the concepts of time, elucidating the view that the past is a part of the present and death is a part of life [1]. Sun analyzed that the appearance of snow in the drama, on the one hand, symbolizes the deceased and is a symbol of the deceased male Fujii. It also indicates that Hiroko can see the deceased everywhere at any time; On the other hand, snow also symbolizes the frozen world in Hiroko's heart. Hiroko has been trapped in the snow multiple times, and such scenes also show a sense of bondage that cannot be obtained or left. This kind of imagery indirectly portrays death, while also demonstrating that death is not terrifying or dim [2]. Although it carries some sadness and sorrow, it also indicates that director Junji Iwai's love for death is not negative or hateful. Junji Iwai is not resistant to death, he does not mean to underestimate or cherish life. On the other hand, Junjun Jiang and Xiaomin Wu's paper pointed out that the film did not extensively depict the fear of death or critical illness, only a slow and sudden acceleration. The first second may still be a smooth life, but the second may be the impermanence of fate. Iwai accurately expresses a very important point in the Japanese philosophy of life: "impermanence" through the unity of "slow" and "fast". Even though the entire Japanese society is very tolerant of death, it does not mean that they will not feel sad about death. The impermanence of life is always sudden and unpredictable, involving many complex emotions and memories worth cherishing. Because someone who loves is alive, life is still precious [3].

Liu proves that the director witnesses the preciousness of life through the meticulous depiction of a family's struggle against death. And the death of male Fujii is the premise of the entire movie. Hiroko's fiancé, Fujii, died in a mountain disaster. Hiroko's infatuation and persistence reveal the delicate and beautiful, but deeply hidden love of male Fujii Shuki [4]. The film does not deliberately depict the cruelty and terror of death, and in the film, death is more like a memory and nostalgia for the deceased by the living. This kind of nostalgia contains love and reluctance, intertwining love and death, and showcasing the complex emotions between more people to the audience. Chen Huixian found that "memory" plays a crucial role in the entire film, especially in the reverse narrative of the memory of the deceased and the overall structure of the film, as well as the protagonist's memories of past love and youth. This once again demonstrates a deep love for the deceased. Although the protagonist has passed away, love is depicted as a spiritual entity that transcends death [5]. This movie praises the eternal side of love on a spiritual level. Meanwhile, the resurrection of love in memory is considered an unattainable wish, reflecting the sad spirit of the Japanese nation. This spirit reflects a preference for death, which is evident in traditional Japanese literature.

According to Maruyama, Fumi, and Kamisasa, Japanese people view the decline of life as a natural factor. This has led to their longing for heaven, where death is not seen as despicable, but as a means of escaping reality and tragic life. This ideology, combined with determinism, defends suicide.

Multiple suicides are considered a viable means for parents and children who are tired of life to escape reality without leaving any traces of guilt [6].

According to statistics from the World Health Organization in 2012, Japan has a relatively high suicide rate compared to other countries, especially industrialized countries, with male suicide rates ranking 21st in the world and female suicide rates ranking 18th in the world. The statistical data provided by the National Police Agency of Japan shows that the number of suicides increased sharply in 1998, exceeding 30000, and recently dropped to below 30. The astonishing increase in suicide rates has attracted the attention of the Japanese mental health community and government, and efforts have been made to develop measures to prevent suicide [7]. Hurst showed in his research on the samurai spirit that there are some differences in the definition and acceptance of death between Japanese and American people. The influence of Buddhism, a local religion in Japan, has led to a common belief in the process of peaceful death, peaceful acceptance of nature, and becoming ancestors. In this worldview, death is a natural part of the process of life [8].

Zhai concluded in her study of death in Japan that death is the ultimate beauty in the Japanese people's worldview, which has led to Japan becoming one of the countries with the highest number of suicides in the world. In Japanese samurai culture, the cherry blossom symbolizes self-destruction and sublimation. The moment the cherry blossom passes away is a call to nature and a perfect farewell to the world. This is a symbol of beauty in Japanese samurai culture, which has sparked the culture of samurai suicide. Japanese samurai believed that death was the best way to wash away shame, and were eagerly imitated by the Japanese people [9]. After studying the trend of martyrdom during the Edo period in Japan, Wu provided further explanation. Flowers belong to the cherry blossom family, and people are nothing but warriors. Japanese people consider cherry blossoms to be both a symbol of beauty and a symbol of transience. They believe that everything in the world is fleeting. Therefore, life should bloom and disappear like cherry blossoms. They yearn for the fleeting beauty of death like cherry blossoms withering in an instant. Japanese people's concept enables them to face death with a beautiful perspective. The seppuku of Japanese samurai is as beautiful as the withered cherry blossoms [10].

Through these academic analyses, the film "Love Letter" has been revealed as a profound exploration of death aesthetics in Japanese cinema, delving into themes of mortality, grief, and the afterlife. This exploration reflects a complex cultural attitude towards death, where it is not merely viewed as an end but as a transition or continuation of existence. The film's portrayal of characters grappling with loss and longing, intertwined with themes of memory and nostalgia, adds layers of depth to its examination of the human experience. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of how Japanese cinema navigates and portrays existential themes, shedding light on cultural perspectives and interpretations of life and death.

3. Methodology

the paper utilizes content analysis, examining the concept of death from three perspectives: character behavior, the interplay and reciprocal influence between love and death in the film, and how the depiction of death in "Love Letter" reflects the values embedded within Japanese social and cultural contexts.

4. Result

Iwai Junji uses Hiroko and Fujii Shuki as dual female leads, showcasing her understanding and acceptance of death and loss through their memories and emotions with the deceased Fujii Shuki, as well as her grandfather's compensatory behavior towards his deceased father. Hiroko recalled her late fiancée and expressed a deep longing for her deceased lover and acceptance of death. Memory plays a crucial role throughout the entire film, especially in the memory of the deceased, expressing appreciation for the past and a reflection on life. These memories, combined with the reverse narrative

structure of the film, showcase the interweaving of time and the irreversibility of life, conveying a sense of sadness and resonating with the audience. Similarly, Junji Iwai did not portray death as very terrifying and frightening but instead led to a very romantic story. He also utilized beautiful photography techniques to capture more beautiful images, allowing people to better understand that death is not a terrifying thing, but a part of life. Fujii tells the story of himself and his father falling ill. Years later, his grandfather successfully saved Fujii Shuki's life on a snowy night, just like a few years ago, making up for the regret of his father's death and demonstrating Junji Iwai's perseverance in cherishing life.

The expression of love is reflected in memory, and Hiroko's memories of past love and youth become a profound nostalgia for his deceased lover, expressing his appreciation and reluctance towards love, as well as the eternal and transcendent spirit of love. Hiroko's indescribable love for his ex-fiancé, his grandfather's love for his granddaughter, and the indescribable love hidden between the deceased male Fujii Shuki and his female Fujii Shuki during his youth. Love is depicted as a transcendent existence that runs through the entire story, praising the eternity and immortality of love.

The religious beliefs and social background in Japanese culture have had an impact on the characters' understanding and expression of death in the film. In the context of Confucianism and determinism, Japanese people view the decline of life as a natural factor and death as a means of escaping reality, which is reflected in the film. Cherry blossom in Samurai culture symbolizes self-destruction and sublimation and represents an aesthetic view of death. The withering of cherry blossoms is seen as a perfect farewell to the world, reflecting a special aesthetic view of death.

5. Discussion

Firstly, Hiroko's deep longing for her deceased fiancée reflects her acceptance of her fiancée's death and her willingness to cherish their memories. At the same time, Fujii recounted his own illness and his father's illness, demonstrating his helpless acceptance of the inevitability of death. This understanding and acceptance of death is not only influenced by personal experiences but also by the Japanese social and cultural background. The view of impermanence and the cycle of life and death in Japanese culture allows characters to exhibit a natural and calm attitude when facing death. This understanding and acceptance of death have multiple impacts. Looking positively, Hiroko and Fujii found venting and ending through their memories, allowing them to accept their losses and find peace. At the same time, their acceptance of death also demonstrates resilience and growth, portraying them as meticulous characters who navigate sadness with strength and elegance. In addition, the acceptance of death by characters reflects a broader cultural value system, namely the impermanence and periodicity of life, promoting a deeper understanding of Japanese cultural perspectives.

However, this attitude of accepting death may also bring some negative effects. Firstly, the characters depicted in this movie seek solace in the memories of deceased loved ones and may unintentionally normalize suicide as a means of escaping pain or longing. Secondly, emphasizing the acceptance of death without exploring other coping mechanisms may perpetuate the fatalistic worldview and hinder individuals from seeking help or support. Finally, a female character played by Hiroko finds solace in her memory of her deceased fiancé, which may reinforce gender expectations for sadness and coping mechanisms, thereby limiting the expression of different experiences.

To maintain a positive impact, we can raise awareness of mental health, diversify expressions, and encourage open dialogue. Meanwhile, to improve negative impacts, we need to challenge stigma, educate content creators, and provide supportive interventions to provide alternative treatment and support pathways for individuals who may be struggling with sadness or suicidal ideation.

In the movie "Love Letter", the themes of love and death are intricately intertwined, exploring their intersection and mutual influence in the lives of characters. Non-linear narrative techniques allow the audience to explore the enduring essence of love in a poignant way, even when facing death. Through memories of past love and connections with deceased loved ones, the character's emotional introspection and growth can be demonstrated. In addition, the cultural values of love and death in

the Japanese cultural background, such as the concept of "monaural unconsciousness" and cultural beliefs surrounding the afterlife and ancestor worship, further shape the portrayal of these themes in the film.

This interaction between love and death has multiple impacts. Looking positively, it evokes a profound emotional response from the audience, cultivating resonance and connection with the character's experiences. At the same time, the exploration of love and death has also sparked philosophical reflection on the essence of existence, death, and interpersonal relationships, and promoted cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. However, this interaction may also bring some negative effects, such as idealization of sadness, normalization of sacrifice, and reinforcement of stereotypes.

To maintain a positive impact, it's important to prioritize authenticity and depth, avoid oversimplification or romanticization, and explore diverse narratives and perspectives on love and death. At the same time, to improve negative impacts, we need to encourage critical participation in media descriptions of love and death, empowering characters to prioritize their autonomy, happiness, and personal growth in managing love and loss, and provide audiences with resources and information on health relationship dynamics, sadness coping strategies, and cultural backgrounds.

6. Conclusion

In short, the exploration of death and its intersection with love in the Japanese film "Love Letter" provides a profound insight into the complexity of human emotions and cultural attitudes towards death. Director Junji Iwai delicately portrays themes of memory, longing, and acceptance through the roles of Hiroko and Fujii, providing the audience with a platform to contemplate existential questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

The non-linear narrative structure of this movie allows for a profound exploration of the eternal essence of love, even in the face of death. Memories of past love and connections with deceased loved ones are catalysts for emotional reflection and growth, highlighting the interconnectedness of time and the irreversibility of life. In addition, the cultural values embedded in Japanese society, such as the concept of "one ear unconsciousness" and beliefs surrounding the afterlife and ancestor worship, further shape the portrayal of love and death in movies.

Although the exploration of love and death evokes profound emotional responses and philosophical contemplation of existence, it also raises awareness of the challenges posed by idealizing sadness, normalizing sacrifice, and reinforcing stereotypes. To maintain a positive impact, it is necessary to prioritize the authenticity and depth of narrative depiction, avoid oversimplification or romanticization, and encourage different perspectives on love and death. In addition, efforts should be made to prioritize autonomy, happiness, and personal growth when managing love and loss, while providing the audience with resources and information on healthy relationship dynamics, sadness coping strategies, and cultural backgrounds. Overall, "Love Letter" is a profound exploration of the aesthetics of death in Japanese cinema, reflecting a complex cultural attitude towards death and the afterlife. By delving into the complexity of human emotions and social values, this film prompts viewers to reflect on their experiences and perspectives, ultimately deepening their understanding of the eternal nature of human condition and love.

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