

Discussion on the Relationship between Lens Language and Visual Culture in Japanese Films

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Abstract: Research on the link between lens language and visual culture in modern Japanese cinema was conducted in this paper, with a particular focus on the film *Hanataba no Koi* (A Bouquet of Love), directed by Hiroyasu Doi, 2022. With the help of film semiotics (Metz), visual culture theory (Mirzoeff), and Japanese aesthetic traditions such as *mono no aware* and *ma*, this paper will examine how certain cinematographic techniques—long takes, static composition, object close-ups, colour design—are used to present social concepts. Based on the above analysis, the film's visual language has revealed the sadness of the post-bubble generation, their anxieties about cultural-class identity, and a loss of urban intimacy. Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* (2021) serves as a reference point for the above observations and is also in line with a wider trend in contemporary Japanese films. The paper believes that lens language in this case does not just show ideology but also creates it actively to spread a unique Japanese sense of sight around the world.

Keywords: Lens Language, Visual Culture, Japanese Cinema, Social Ideology, *Hanataba no Koi*, Everyday Aesthetics, Post-Bubble Generation.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Contemporary Japanese cinema has gained the attention of scholars in recent years due to its increased spread around the world through online platforms and major film festivals. After 2020, films produced in Japan have generally taken a closer-up shot of life and focused on the subtle atmosphere of urban life for young people who face problems such as unstable employment, marital crises, and the pressure to fit into society's ideal. In light of these changes, scholars have been exploring how lens language, that is to say the regular application of shot size, placement, camera motion, light and colour, conveys cultural values and social ideas more systematically.

Hanataba no Koi (released in Japan in January 2022, directed by) Hiroyasu Doi and Yuji Sakamoto's work of screenwriting offers a relatively abundant material for this kind of research. The film performed well at home and was also acclaimed by critics; it depicted a young couple in Tokyo with similar subcultural interests in literature, independent films and vinyl records who were initially close but could not sustain their relationship, thus resonating with many people in Japan and abroad [10]. A relatively simple style is used, long shots and natural light are employed to present scenes of daily life, and certain objects in daily life serve as signs for deep social and ideological meanings.

1.2. Research Questions

The three linked research questions of this paper are:

RQ1: How does *Hanataba no Koi* use the lens language of visual narrative to construct an image of contemporary Japanese youth life?

RQ2: What social ideologies are carried by the visuals in the movie?

RQ3: How much of a trend in Japanese cinema after 2020 does this aesthetic system represent?

1.3. Contributions

The two first are the paper's contents. First, it addresses a deficiency in the current research, which has focused on the earlier works of Japanese auteur cinema or internationally well-known arthouse directors, giving relatively little attention to mainstream Japanese literary adaptations of the early 2020s that have achieved considerable cultural impact [11]. Second, it integrates film semiotics analysis, visual culture theory and Japanese aesthetic philosophy to build a combined analytical system for close textual study of a single contemporary work.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1. Film Semiotics: Metz and the Language of Cinema

Christian Metz made an initial contribution to film semiotics by proposing the idea of a 'grande syntagmatique'; that is to say, through a system of codes in films, the arrangement and sequence of shots are used to produce meaning that exceeds that of the individual shots themselves [1]. Metz does not consider the "language" of cinema to be the same as spoken language; rather, he believes that a system of signs exists within films, and a shot is a basic carrier for meaning production in this system. Shot size, length of time, movement, editing speed, etc., can all be employed to set up a specific distance between the audience and the world of the film, and also carry ideological content.

Metz's system has also been applied to *Hanataba no Koi*, and it is believed that the film employs longer shots and fewer cuts to reduce the sense of narrative time and focus on the phenomenological texture of daily life. As a syntagmatic device, the extended shot is not only prolonged in time but also expresses an ideological will to have common life be given sustained attention by the eye, even when there is nothing exceptional happening [2].

2.2. Visual Culture Theory: Mirzoeff and Visuality

Nicholas Mirzoeff's idea of "visuality" is not about analyzing images as texts but rather about the social relationships of seeing, including who has the power to look, what is made visible, and whose experiences are given visibility under a particular visual system [3]. Mirzoeff's visual culture has never been politically neutral; rather, it proposes a form of the naturalisation of power relations and the continuity of social norms through control over visibility. This system is highly suitable for analysing how Japanese cinema presents the life of young people in the city, making certain kinds of precarity, loneliness and cultural aspiration visible, while rendering others invisible or peripheral.

In *Hanataba no Koi*, the visual system is one of intimacy and indoor scenes; the camera is generally close to the characters and does not often take a wide shot of the city. This spatial arrangement of vision reflects and promotes a social imagination in which the inner lives of ordinary young people—their tastes, their conversations, their gradual alienation—constitute the legitimate objects of serious cinematic study [8].

2.3. Japanese Aesthetic Traditions in Contemporary Cinema

Two representative Japanese aesthetic ideas are suitable for this study. *Mono no aware* is a concept from Heian-period literary culture that Motoori Norinaga theorised; it is a tender, wistful awareness of the transient nature of life and is said to make beauty more poignant because it will fade away [4]. *Ma* refers to the productive value of emptiness, pause and interval in both space and time; that is to say, meaning is not found in what is present but in what is omitted or left open [5].

Both ideas have been known to affect Japanese film style, and Yasujiro Ozu's works are typical examples, with his use of pillow shots and static frames to create a visually calm world that encourages quiet reflection [11]. At present, these traditions are not deliberately constructed formal systems, but rather reappear as cultural intuitions regarding the speed of presentation, arrangement of elements, and emotional control. *Hanataba no Koi* is a typical case of this inheritance; it is slow in pace, observes the fleeting beauty of life, and does not have strong emotional expressions, all of which align with the aesthetic of *mono no aware*.

3. Lens Language and Everyday Aesthetics in *Hanataba no Koi*

3.1. Long Takes and Static Composition: Temporal Texture of Youth

Director Hiroyasu Doi and cinematographer Ryuto Kondo have developed a visual system for this film that uses long takes and is mainly composed of static or very slow-moving shots. Rather than using fast cuts to save time and generate a sense of speed, the film allows scenes to proceed at a slower pace that is more akin to life. The selected one forms a kind of "temporal texture", and the subjects are affected by a sense of time that differs from ordinary life [6].

Thus, *Hanataba no Koi* can be included in the larger lineage of Japanese cinema that regards the long take as both an ethical and aesthetic act: a refusal to subject life's duration to the demands of storytelling efficiency [2]. The still camera shows Mugino and Kiyofumi sitting together in their

apartment, quietly reading their own books; however, this is not to present the ordinary life, but also to convey an idea of what is worth watching and what we believe to be precious in daily life. The visual effect of these pauses and holds expresses a sense of loss prior to explicit mention in the story, and the viewer is already aware of this sadness at a pre-analytical level [5].

3.2. Close-ups of Everyday Objects: Subcultural Identity and Visual Symbolism

One of the typical visual devices in *Hanataba no Koi* is the frequent use of close-ups to focus on and frame certain daily-life objects, such as paper-back books, vinyl records, used bookstore receipts, cinema ticket stubs, and film festival programmes. These objects serve as signs of subcultural capital in the sense theorised by Pierre Bourdieu; that is to say, cultural knowledge and taste are forms of capital that indicate social status and enable group participation [7]. The characters' common ability to recognise and appreciate these objects forms the basis of their connection; the gradual displacement of these objects from the *mise-en-scène* in the latter half of the film indicates the loss of that shared sense of identity.

Visually speaking, what is ordinarily production design will be shown in an important way here. The objects are not only in the background; they also carry the stories of life and how Japanese youth now use the consumption of culture to identify themselves [8]. Through a close-up, these objects are separated from their environments and given momentary visual focus; at the same time, the characters themselves perform this action by making subcultural taste a kind of value system.

3.3. Colour Palette and Lighting Design: Constructing Nostalgia and Loss

The colours and lights of the movie are different, but still make sense in the story. The first half has warm, amber-coloured natural light: the golden light of late afternoons in small apartments, in second-hand bookshops, and the gentle illumination of shared evenings. This colour scheme has a sense of nostalgia; such a feeling of nostalgia was already reflected in the film's visual language from the start, and it fits well with the frame-within-a-frame method used to tell the story of the couple in the past. The second half is relatively dark and flat, and the pictures are messy and have been less carefully arranged; at the same time, the environment for viewing is also poorer [6].

Chronotically, this is *mono no aware*; the early works are inherently associated with the sense of fleeting time [4]. The viewer is in a position to witness the later scenes as a kind of visual loss, and thus mourns not only the relationship but also the particular light that was present at that time.

4. Visual Culture and Social Ideology in Contemporary Japanese Cinema

4.1. Consumerism and Cultural Class: Visual Codification

Hanataba no Koi's Visual Vocabulary has also raised serious issues regarding the connection between cultural consumption and social class in modern Japan. A new version of Tokyo youth culture is shown in the film, and access to a

specific set of literary and cinematic knowledge serves as the main form of social and romantic connection. According to Bourdieu, this is a kind of cultural capital that serves to distinguish oneself from others in society and also provides one with a feeling of joy and meaning [7]. The film's visual system, such as reverent close-ups of subcultural items and carefully directed scenes in independent bookshops and arthouse cinemas, all contribute to the construction and validation of this value system.

However, the film also shows that this cultural economy is unstable. The second half of the story shows how the characters lose their sense of communal time as they move out of the home to work full-time and are too exhausted or busy to enjoy culture. The visual strategy is also one of decline; the beautiful close-up shots are now less frequent, and instead we see scenes of offices, commuter trains and blank phone screens [10]. The idea of culture is twofold: it is desirable for the people's spiritual enrichment, yet it must still conform to the economic and social reality.

4.2. Urban Loneliness and the Crisis of Intimacy

Contemporary sociological research has identified urban loneliness as one of the main social problems in post-2010 Japan, and it is serious enough to have been addressed at the ministerial level in 2021 through the appointment of a minister for loneliness and isolation [9]. *Hanataba no Koi* also shows this social situation in a soft but meaningful way through a special language. As their relationship deteriorates, the composition of the film increasingly separates the two protagonists within the frame; in the earlier scenes, they were placed close together in the same shot, but in the later scenes, they were separated by furniture, space, and gradually more so by the borders of individual close-ups that no longer merged into shared two-shots.

This spatial arrangement of the frame can make the sense of distance in the intimacy visually perceptible without direct contradiction [3]. The Ideological implication is that the loneliness in modern Tokyo is not caused by extraordinary reasons but is the result of the slow, gradual development of society and the economy. The visual culture of the film normalises this erosion while mourning it; this is a double ideological operation that Mirzoeff would have called a visual regime that makes certain social conditions appear natural and unavoidable.

4.3. Post-Bubble Youth Melancholy: Visual Expression of a Lost Generation

The wider social context of *Hanataba no Koi* is the lived reality of Japanese young adults who have come of age entirely in the post-bubble economic era: a context marked by labour precarity, declining marriage rates, reduced social mobility, and what sociologists have termed a "low desire society" (*tei-yoku shakai*) [10]. The film's style is slow-paced, tends to be static rather than dynamic, and uses a sad colour scheme; thus, it can also be regarded as a work of art that reflects the current social environment. The lack of aspiration in the film's visual grammar is itself an ideology; it is not a cinema of hope and advancement, but rather one that quietly observes what is left over after the large-scale aspirations of society have faded [9].

4.4. Comparative Analysis: Drive My Car (2021)

Ryusuke Hamaguchi's *Drive My Car* won the Academy Award for Best International Feature Film in 2022 and provides a good case study [11]. *Hanataba no Koi* is also a work with long takes and restrained cuts, presenting a slow visual rhythm to give the characters' inner lives more space. Hamaguchi's visual system is more overtly theatrical and conversational; the extended conversations in the moving car are filmed with a sense of stillness, turning speech into a kind of visual event and thus deviating from the traditional premise that cinema is mainly an art of images [2].

Both movies have a similar trait of contemporary Japanese cinema: they are perceived as "aesthetics of endurance", using visual language to have viewers dwell in an uncomfortable emotional state for an extended period. *Hanataba no Koi* is achieved by domestic intimacy and object symbolism; *Drive My Car* is achieved through continuous dialogue and theatrical self-awareness [8]. Together, they propose an emergent aesthetic formation in post-2020 Japanese cinema that employs visual restraint as an ideological posture: a refusal of cinematic spectacle in favour of a cinema of attention and care.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1. The Mutual Construction of Lens Language and Ideology

The analysis in this paper provides theoretical support for the proposition that lens language and ideology are in a state of mutual construction, rather than merely reflection. *Hanataba no Koi* does not merely show the pre-existing social situation; rather, it also actively influences how people are able to perceive, feel and judge this situation. The film's elegiac visual language presents the melancholy of post-bubble youth culture not as a contingent historical situation subject to political contestation, but as a kind of beautiful inevitability; thus, by aestheticising social precarity in this way, it achieves a specific ideological effect that arouses emotional identification rather than critical thinking. This is not a critique of the film, but rather a comment on the ideological complexity of all visual art that also aims to provide aesthetic pleasure and social commentary.

5.2. Japanese Visual Culture in Global Context

The overseas success of *Hanataba no Koi*, which has been shown in many parts of East and Southeast Asia, and the widespread recognition *Drive My Car* has achieved globally suggest that the specific visual culture of contemporary Japanese cinema has reached a level of soft power circulation that extends well beyond Japan. *Mono no aware* aesthetics, visual poetry, and a mournful attention to everyday life are not only Japanese cultural exports but also aesthetic resources that can resonate with the experiences of navigating the challenges of urban life, relationship anxiety and post-growth social disillusionment in other parts of the world. Therefore, the study of lens language in this context also has implications for Japanese film studies and for promoting a wider understanding of how visual culture operates as a vehicle for cross-cultural ideological transmission.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Although a single case study is methodologically suitable

for in-depth exploration by this paper, the results may not be generalisable. In the future, more research may be carried out to extend this framework to a larger body of Japanese films produced between 2020 and now for a more systematic study of visual trends and ideological changes. Audience Reception Studies - how Japanese and international viewers actually make meaning of these films - would also be added to this textually analytical study to determine whether the ideological connotations identified by the analyst are congruent with those received by viewers.

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