

# Japanese Views of Life and Death in the Film *Love Letter* (1995)

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### Abstract:

The Japanese film *Love Letter*, directed by Shunji Iwai, becomes a film that is appropriate for studying Japanese people's values because of its aesthetic value, elaborate plot, and profound theme. In the aesthetic style, the two images of snow and cherry blossoms that the director uses are in line with the aesthetics of *mono no aware* and embody the concept of "cherish the beauty of the moment"; the plot is based on the death of one protagonist, and the main line is based on the memories of the other two protagonists about him, reflecting the idea of "death is a part of life" which the director wanted to express through such arrangement; the concept of "face the impermanence of life with peace of mind" is illustrated by the combination of the theme "facing death, accepting death" and the Japanese view on impermanence. This article shows how the Japanese view of life and death is combined with the film *Love Letter*, providing readers with a new perspective on the film and a way to understand the Japanese view of life and death.

**Keywords:** Love Letter; Shunji Iwai; life and death; mono no aware; impermanence

## 1. Introduction

Due to the Japanese's unique culture, historical background, and geographical environment, they have developed a unique view of life and death, which play an important role in Japanese culture and values. The traditional seppuku ceremony for the samurai in Japan and the high suicide rate in Japanese society have attracted widespread attention to their views on life and death. Therefore, the Japanese view of life and death is precious for research.

The period from 1991 to 2001 has been called Japan's "Lost Decade", during which the Japanese economy

came to stagnation, unemployment increased sharply, and a large number of factories went bankrupt. Such a social crisis caused Japanese people to think about life and death, so views of life and death influenced Japanese films in the 1990s profoundly. *Love Letter*, directed by Shunji Iwai, and released in 1995, is one of the representatives. As a romance movie, it depicts not only thoughts on love but also deep thoughts on life and death.

The story of *Love Letter* begins with a memorial ceremony. Hiroko Watanabe came to attend the second-anniversary memorial ceremony of her fiancé male Itsuki Fujii. Out of nostalgia, she decided to

send a “letter to heaven” to male Itsuki’s address in childhood. To her surprise, she received a reply, written by a girl who was also named Itsuki Fujii. Hiroko learned that this “Itsuki Fujii” and her fiancé used to be classmates, and through correspondence and her visit to the male Itsuki’s hometown Otaru, she learned about the past of the two and finally relieved of male Itsuki’s death. For female Itsuki, her father died due to a severe cold several years ago, and she hasn’t accepted her father’s death, therefore she didn’t dare to go to the hospital and also closed her memories about that time, including with male Itsuki. After she was successfully cured of a severe cold, she faced the death of her father. Through correspondence with Hiroko, she recalled the story between her and male Itsuki. This film won the Best Film award at the Kinema Junpo Awards in 1996 and the Audience Award at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1995.

Through the deep integration with the Japanese aesthetic concept of *mono no aware*, the special plot arrangement with death as a clue, and the deepening of the theme of “facing death, accepting death”, this film provides the audience with a channel to see and feel the unique views of life and death in Japan. Although many scholars study Japanese films and Japanese values, few people use film as a lens to study values on life and death. This article will mainly analyze the Japanese views of life and death through the aesthetic style, plot structure, and thematic aspects of *Love Letter* and explore the origin of the concepts.

## 2. Methods

On the one hand, this paper utilizes content analysis to examine Japanese views of life and death in *Love Letter* by analyzing the filming techniques, and the role that death plays in plot arrangement in the film; on the other hand, this paper employs literature analysis draws upon existing

literature to analyze the traditional concepts of the Japanese views of life and death which are combined with the story of *Love Letter*.

## 3. Analysis

### 3.1 The aesthetic style

The aesthetic style of *Love Letter* is completely in line with the traditional Japanese aesthetic concept of *Mono no aware*. Dragan Ćalović explains: “*Mono no aware* refers to the experience of fleeting and impermanent beauty”. This concept is mainly reflected in the two images chosen by the director in the film - snow and cherry blossoms.

Snow is a clue that runs through the entire film. In a long shot at the beginning of the film, which lasts about two minutes, Hiroko walks in a vast expanse of snow (Figure 1). Here, the director uses a dolly shot, starting with the camera focusing only on Hiroko and slowly broadening the horizon. Hiroko in the picture becomes smaller and smaller, villages and snow mountains in the distance are exposed, and finally, the picture stays in a shot in which the snow seems to engulf Hiroko. In this way, the snow occupies the entire frame, giving the impression that the snow is enveloping Hiroko, to create a vast and bleak atmosphere, set the tone of sadness at the beginning of the story, and also hint at Hiroko’s inner sadness.

Snow also plays an important role in the development of the plot: At the beginning of the story, Hiroko is attending the memorial ceremony of male Itsuki, and it’s snowing heavily during the ceremony (Figure 2); male Itsuki died in a snow disaster while mountaineering and female Itsuki’s father passed away because he was unable to receive timely treatment due to heavy snowfall; also, the hometown of the two Itsuki is Otaru, a northern city in Japan where snow is frequent (Figure 3).



**Figure 1: Hiroko walks in a vast expanse of snow**



**Figure 2: The snowy memorial ceremony**



**Figure 3: the hometown of the two Itsuki - Otaru**

Cherry blossoms appear at the beginning of female Itsuki's memories (Figure 4). The director used a medium shot to shoot the cherry blossom petals scattered on the

ground, and a full shot to show the petals falling, and this imagery is also mentioned in the correspondence between Hiroko and female Itsuki in the plot.



**Figure 4: Cherry blossoms at the beginning of female Itsuki's memories**

Snow and cherry blossoms, when exist, both create an incomparable natural beauty, and they disappear just as quickly: the snow melts quickly when it falls; the cherry blossoms bloom for only ten to twenty days, and they fall rapidly and abnormally. Due to the "impermanent beauty" they create, they become the typical imagery of *mono no aware*, and therefore make the aesthetic style of *Love Letter* completely in line with this aesthetic concept. The design of the aesthetic style in the film reflects the Japanese views of life and death that the director wants to convey,

which is also the views that the concept of *mono no aware* wants to convey: cherish the beauty of the moment, and it's enough for the beauty to exist at the moment, which means cherish every day you live.

### 3.2 The plot arrangement.

In the plot arrangement of *Love Letter*, male Itsuki's death plays an essential narrative role. In the story, male Itsuki's death triggers Hiroko's nostalgia for him, which results in

the act of sending a letter. Female Itsuki's correspondence with Hiroko further unfolds female Itsuki's memories of what happened in the past between her and male Itsuki. From the logic of such a plot development, it can be found that the whole story is built on the death of male Itsuki and then advanced by Hiroko's nostalgia for him and female Itsuki's memories of him. Even though male Itsuki has passed away in the story, he still appears as a thread throughout the story instead of disappearing.

In an early interview with the director Shunji Iwai, he mentioned that he drew on the idea that "death is not the opposite of life, but a part of life" from Haruki Murakami's novel *Norwegian Wood* when conceiving the plot of *Love Letter*. Such as an ingenious plot arrangement that is based on the death of male Itsuki also perfectly reflects what this idea wants to express, and it is also the Japanese view of life and death that the director wants to express through this film. Combined with the plot, this view can be analyzed from two perspectives: the perspective of the living and the perspective of the dead. For the living, "a part of life" can be explained as the memories that the dead people left are part of their life; For the dead people, this view can be interpreted as physical death does not mean real death as long as people remember them, their souls will continue to exist as part of their lives.

The second interpretation, which is the interpretation of this view of life and death from the perspective of the dead people, can also be deciphered in two ways. The one is related to traditional Shintoism in Japan. As Jean Herbert mentioned in *Tama no mi-hashii* in 1967, "the souls of the Japanese... when they die... remain eternally in Japan", in the Shinto faith, a human spirit is believed to remain forever. The other one has something to do with the relationship between the dead and the living. Being a human means being part of a human network, and as long as the dead are remembered as a member of the group, they do not lose their personality, so death on the physical level does not mean real death.

Thus, the plot arrangement illustrates the Japanese view of life and death that "death is not the opposite of life, but a part of life".

### 3.3 The elaboration of theme.

At the beginning of the plot, Hiroko holds her breath under the snow mountain that took male Itsuki's life and wants to experience what male Itsuki felt like when he died, after the memorial ceremony, she sends a "letter to heaven" to force herself to accept male Itsuki's death; also, female Itsuki suffered from a bad cold, but she is afraid to go to the hospital and refuses treatment because she doesn't accept her father's death. At the end of the

plot, Hiroko finally shouts "I'm fine" to that snow mountain; also, female Itsuki finally stops being afraid of going to the hospital and faces her father's death. It can be seen from the direction of the main storylines of the characters that the theme of the film is "facing and accepting the impermanence of life". The Japanese view of life and death that the director wants to embody through the expression of such a theme is how Japanese people face the impermanence of life. In other words, the concept of life and death embodied here is consistent with the Japanese view of impermanence.

The development of the view of impermanence in Japan includes environmental and cultural factors. In terms of environmental factors, Japanese people have been plagued by frequent natural disasters. From the statistics of the Cabinet Office White Paper on Disaster Management, it can be seen that in the decade from 2003 to 2013, there were 326 earthquakes of magnitude 6 or higher in Japan, compared with only 1,758 in the world in that period. Meanwhile, Japan has 110 active volcanoes that could erupt at any time. Such an environment has kept Japanese people living in "uncertainty". Therefore, they've built an awareness of "after the disaster is better days", which has given them the strength to face the uncertainty with acceptance. This has made Japanese people very resilient. In terms of cultural factors, the transmission of Buddhism in the 6th century brought the idea of "everything is transient and impermanent" to Japanese people, which encouraged their acceptance of life's unavoidable fluctuation. The environment and culture have made Japanese people accept the impermanence of life and develop their view of impermanence: people should face the impermanence of life with a self-consistent, peaceful state of mind, and not indulge in pain and fear of death. This is the view of life and death that the theme wants to express.

But there are two sides to this notion. The positive side is that this view toward impermanence can reduce people's pain and fear when facing death and make death easier to accept. The negative side is relevant to a social problem that is discussed frequently in the world—the high suicide rate. From 1990 to 2022, Japan's suicide rate was about 15-25 people per 100k, which is higher than many countries in the world. This high suicide rate is related to the Japanese concept of impermanence mentioned above, when people are not afraid of death and face it with a peaceful mind, in a way, this may contribute to the "longing for heaven": suicide can be used as an escape from reality and miserable life since death is not painful or terrible.



## 4. Conclusion

Due to the influence of society, Japanese views of life and death were incorporated into Japanese films in the 1990s and expressed through the filming techniques and plot of the film.

This article explores the Japanese views of life and death embodied in Shunji Iwai's film *Love Letter* from the perspective of the aesthetic concept of *mono no aware* in the film, the plot arrangement based on the death of one protagonist, and the integration of the theme "facing death, accepting death" with the traditional Japanese view of impermanence. In the aesthetic style, the two images of snow and cherry blossoms that the director uses a lot in the film are in line with the aesthetics of *mono no aware* and embody the concept of "cherish the beauty of the moment" in it; the plot is based on male Itsuki's death, and the nostalgia and memories of Hiroko and female Itsuki unfold layer by layer, indicating the idea of "death is a part of life" which the director wanted to express through such arrangement; the concept of "face the impermanence of life with peace of mind" is illustrated by the combination of the theme "facing death, accepting death" and the Japanese view on impermanence.

However, this article also has some limitations. The first limitation is the limitation of the perspective. On the one hand, in terms of research objects, since the main characters of *Love Letter* are all in the middle class, and the main audience of the film is also the middle class, the research in this article is limited to the study of the views of life and death of the middle class in Japan at that time; on the other hand, the views this article study is limited to what the director wanted to tell us, so it doesn't fully reflect all Japanese views of life and death. Second, some interpretations of the film are the author's personal opinions and may not be entirely objective. Finally, some of the analyses are not in-depth, such as the explanation of the view

of life and death embodied in the plot arrangement, which doesn't provide an in-depth analysis of the origin of this view, that is, its relationship with Shintoism. Hence, future research will include research on Japan's view of life and death in more groups of people and more periods, and the analysis will be more objective and in-depth.

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