

A Study of the Visual Aesthetics of Japanese Director Iwai Shunji's Films

Yichen Qiu^{1,*}

¹The School of Journalism and Communication, Zhongyuan University of Technology, Zhengzhou, Henan, 450007, China

*Corresponding author:
202117044101@zut.edu.cn

Abstract:

Born in the 1960s, Iwai Shunji is a Japanese writer and director. His works are rich in romance, but the stories he tells are often characterized by a Japanese aesthetic of material sadness and a sense of contrast. This paper examines the visual aesthetics of Iwai Shunji's films. By studying it, readers will be able to gain a more detailed understanding of Iwai Shunji's aesthetic style and how he skillfully uses color and light in his films. This paper will examine four films, *Love Letter*, *Swallowtail Butterfly*, *All About Lily Chou-chou*, and *Hana & Alice*, with specific reference to hue and saturation, use of light, and film style. In these four films, warm and cool colors can reflect the contrast between memories and reality, present story conflicts and portray characters. The soft light effect can fit the beautiful and romantic theme of the film and enhance the credibility of the story. The film sense and overexposure can enhance the sense of unreality and age.

Keywords: Iwai Shunji; Films; Visual Aesthetics

1. Introduction

Shunji Iwai is a Japanese film director, writer, and documentary filmmaker. He is the flag-bearer of Japan's New Cinema Movement, and is regarded as Japan's most promising new "image writer". Since the 1990s, Japanese cinema has been revived, and a powerful "New Japanese Cinema Movement" has been launched in Asia and around the world. Shunji Iwai, who is known for his fresh and unique imagery, as well as his emotional subtlety, is one of the best of the younger generation of Japanese directors.

Since the 1960s, Japan's economic development has been characterised by "the same path of misfortune and good fortune, the same paradoxical pattern of prosperity and decline", with society alternating

between revitalisation and disillusionment. The economic ups and downs have dealt a heavy psychological blow to the Japanese nation, causing them to feel an infinite longing for the good old days before the war. As a result, the traditional Japanese concepts of life and death and the culture of mourning were the main axes, mixed with other diversified factors, which jointly influenced the Japanese film industry from the 1990s onwards. Shunji Iwai, a representative director of the period, has interpreted many films that revolve around the theme of death, which has resulted in an extreme aesthetic that is uniquely his own and characteristic of Japanese culture.

Shunji Iwai, a film director and writer born in the 1960s, can be called the "new man" of Japan's

historical period. The directors and writers born during this period had a relatively affluent adolescence, but as Japan's economy fell in the latter part of the decade, the "new man" developed an unprecedented sense of crisis. Iwai Shunji, as one of the representatives of this movement, challenged the status quo of a depressed society and was called "the flag-bearer of the New Japanese Cinema Movement". He is very good at capturing the subtle emotional and psychological changes of his characters, often through shaky-cam, rapid montage, and jump-joints, creating a sense of ravishing dreaminess. His films are often romantic and beautiful, yet they provide a spot-on insight into the nature of events, brutal and realistic. Here's what the Chinese news network had to say about Iwai Shunji: Iwai Shunji's attitude towards his films is like the way he interacts with the people around him—Instead of talking to each other about something, he was conversing with his other self. He was easily immersed in his own narrative until the other person interrupted, but soon he moved on to the next "self".

He is known for *April Story*, *Swallowtail Butterfly*, *Love Letter*, *Hana & Alice*, and *All About Lily Chou-chou*. Most of the works are based on the theme of love, expressing the praise and nostalgia for youth in a highly romantic style. But often the apparent beauty is actually hidden sadness, in addition to showing the simple beauty of youth also reveals the violence and cruelty behind the beauty, haunted by the aesthetics of material sadness and the smell of death. He demonstrates his unique self-styling through this two-way extreme style, interpreting the Japanese extreme-style national culture. His works are presented to the audience with a subtle and mysterious beauty through this bland and warm but melancholic tone. This kind of aesthetics is most importantly a mood, not the ending, and this kind of poetic picturesque is Iwai Shunji's ultimate aesthetics of things. Iwai Shunji also has a unique camera language. In the case of the film *All About Lily Chou-chou*, which tells a story about a heavy subject like bullying in schools. However, he uses strong contrasts, bright and fresh tones, and large colour blocks, such as the verdant wheat field that occupies two-thirds of the picture, and the beautiful young girl flying a red kite in the warm afterglow of the setting sun. He is very good at using the beautiful and dreamy feeling camera language to tell the harsh truth.

By examining Iwai Shunji's visual aesthetics, readers will be able to understand the director's unique personal aesthetic style in greater detail and learn how he skillfully uses light and color in his films.

2. Literature Review

Throughout the development of global cinema, Japanese films have distinguished themselves in the history of cinema with a unique artistic aesthetic. Through simple shooting techniques, life-affirming dialogues, exquisitely designed visual elements, and Zen-like empty shots, these films often tell the audience one wonderful story after another. The development of art comes from life, and Japan is an island nation surrounded by sea, which gives them an innate sense of isolation and loneliness in their character. At the same time, they face frequent natural disasters, which aggravates the pessimism in the spiritual core of the nation, and this also leads to Japanese aesthetics often conveying a sense of powerlessness over reality, and the great sadness that everything will fade away [1]. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy also mentions that in Japanese aesthetics, creators put a "melancholy filter" on Japanese artworks by depicting the environment in a mournful way. This style of depiction has had a great influence on the development of Japanese cinema and can be seen in many of Iwai Shunji's works [2].

Iwai Shunji's films are one of the representative works of Japanese aesthetics, and analyzing the visual elements of this director is one of the aspects of studying the development of Japanese aesthetics. Many scholars have analyzed the visual elements of Iwai Shunji's films in detail.

Deng Wenhe's characterization of the pessimism of Iwai Shunji's films also side-steps this innate sadness of the Japanese artist. The author mentions that Iwai Shunji's works also often refer to the heavy topics of life and death [3]. In Lee Kwang-chu's analysis of *Love Letter*, he similarly mentions Shunji Iwai's allusions to life and death throughout the film [4]. Xiang Jiyuan and Liao Jingjing also attribute Shunji Iwai's portrayal of life and death to the Japanese aesthetic of "material sorrow" [5,6].

When a film mentions a confused life and the fear of death, it paints the film as tragic to a certain extent. And Shunji Iwai is exactly the kind of director who excels at discussing this topic and skillfully connects adolescence with the confusion of life and the fear of death.

Ali Nobil Ahmad mentions that film artists have always explored color, and in the quest for color, color is never meant to be an exact replica of what is found in nature, but rather an artistic expression that follows the principles of aesthetics [7].

In his essay, Sun Jiaming analyzes the graphic and color aesthetics of Shunji Iwai's film *All About Lily Chou-chou*. He argues that Iwai Shunji's use of backlighting and hand-held shooting enhances the emotional tension of the story. At the same time, he uses black and green extensively in this film for emotional implication, documenting a period

of adolescent rebellion and despair [8].

This is also summed up by Deng Wenhe, Shunji Iwai's use of color is distinctly personal, he favors blue, white, and red. He favors blue, white and red, and each film has a main color tone. The white color of *Love Letter*, the blue color of *Dream Traveler*, and so on. A unified color palette can give the audience a stronger sense of immersion [3].

A number of Iwai Shunji's films also display visual purity and beauty. In addition to the main color palette, Iwai Shunji has also done an exquisite job in shaping the atmosphere of the scenes. Liao Jingjing mentioned that the beautiful warm yellow color tone in *Love Letter* brings high artistry and viewability to this film [6]. Qingmiao Xu also mentions Iwai Shunji's shaping of atmosphere, focusing on his use of cold colors in *Love Letter*. He mentions that this large area of cold color is a kind of coldness that can penetrate the audience's emotions, which undoubtedly strengthens the emotional impact of the story [9].

In addition to this, Iwai's use of light in his films is also worth examining. In their article, So and Wai Fung mention Iwai's frequent use of backlighting, which mimics the light from a window and creates a unique sense of fantasy for the film [10].

3. Methodology

This article will analyze five of Iwai's films, namely *Swallowtail Butterfly*, *Love Letter*, *Hana & Alice* and *All About Lily Chou-chou*. In this paper, visual aesthetics will be divided into three parts for analysis, which are the cold and saturation of tones, the use of different light and shadow, and the unique film style.

4. Result

The first conclusion observed in this paper is that Shunji Iwai is adept at switching between warm and cool tones as well as high and low-saturated hues for different emotional expressions in his films. For example, in the film *Love Letter*, the low saturated cold tones represent reality, and the high saturated warm tones represent memories, while most of the low saturated tones emphasize the pure and aesthetic style of the film, laying down a slow and delicate narrative style. Warm colors in the film *Swallowtail Butterfly* represent positive plot developments, while cold colors accentuate the cruel and absurd reality. The film *Hana & Alice* switches between both high and low saturated color tones and cool and warm tones, highlighting the different moods of the picture.

The second conclusion observed in this paper is that Iwai Shunji makes good use of light, such as backlighting, soft light, and silhouette light, to portray characters and set

the atmosphere. In the film *Love Letter* and *Swallowtail Butterfly*, backlighting and soft-lighting effects are used in many places where light can penetrate, such as doors and windows, to enhance the haze and aesthetic quality of the picture. The film *All About Lily Chou-chou* uses a lot of backlit shots when filming the characters to portray the inner world of the main character.

The third conclusion observed in this paper is that Shunji Iwai is adept at using exposure, low tolerance, and film sense to render atmosphere and emphasize personal style. The film sense also reflects a specific chronological background, and the use of a large number of images with a rough film sense and nostalgic style in the film *All About Lily Chou-chou* reflects an extreme stylization. The film *Hana & Alice* uses a blend of film style and exposure techniques to reflect the ignorance and rawness, innocence and beauty of adolescence.

5. Discussion

Iwai Shunji is good at switching between warm and cool tones as well as high and low saturated tones in his films for different emotional expressions. Hue is the emotional tone of the picture expressed in the color configuration, a tendency, and feeling of color connotation. Color corresponds to inner feelings and affects the audience's mood. The different colors chosen for the film will correspond to the different feelings of the audience. There is a concept in color, it is divided into three labels. Take blue as an example, the first is called "figurative associations", blue will make people think of the night, the sea, the blue sky, and white clouds. Followed by positive associations, such as trust, loyalty, calmness, rationality, coolness, etc. And finally, the negative associations will make people think of depression, cold, thin indifference, etc. Saturation is the vividness of the color of the picture, the higher the saturation, the more intense the tone. The thick tone of the picture brings visual richness and vitality, suitable for the expression of more open and enthusiastic emotional content; and the lower the saturation, the lighter the tone, the lighter tone of the picture of visual softness and elegance, suitable for the expression of the more calm and subtle, restrained and introverted emotional tendencies. Iwai Shunji has linked both warm and cold tones with high and low saturation in several films, creating different contrasts and collisions.

For example, when showing real-life scenes in the film *Love Letter*, the images are bluish and less saturated, dominated by cold tones, while the scenes in which the story takes place are in winter, and many of the scenes are presented in large snowy landscapes. This time with a low saturation of cold colors will give people a sense

of quiet indifference, just as the heroine has never been able to release from the death of her lover, laying the emotional tone of the film's melancholy sadness; but at the same time, this emotion is delicate, low saturation weakened the negative associations of the blue tones, but instead of making the positive associations can be presented, with a sense of aesthetics. Iwai Shunji presents the Japanese aesthetics of material sorrow and his own unique aesthetic style. On the contrary, warm colors bring a warm and healing feeling. In portraying the memories between the male and the female Fujii Itsuki, the image is yellowish, saturated, and dominated by warm colors. This color palette provides clues to the storyline. Although the male Fujii Itsuki's love for the female Fujii Itsuki is never explicitly mentioned in the story, this warm and healing color palette is omnipresent in the writing of the youthful yet beautiful memories of youth, which provides hints and backgrounds for the development of the storyline, and makes the development of the plot more logical. The use of warm colors to depict memories and cold colors to write reality creates a sharp contrast in the same film.

In the film *Swallowtail Butterfly*, the same contrast of warm and cold colors is also used. This film is different from *Love Letter*, which is a clean love story, the story structure is grand and dark, revealing the portrayal of human nature of the marginalized characters, which is full of scenes containing bloody violence and dirty eroticism. In the mid to late 1980s, before the bubble economy in Japan broke, the average wage in Japan was a huge sum of money compared to other countries, so that there were rumors that "a person engaged in carrying dead bodies in Japan and made a lot of money" or "a person selling household appliances in the garbage in Japan and made a fortune", Japan became a good place to make money in people's minds, and people then called it "Yentown". The term "Yentowns" was derived from this, referring to the people who came to Japan from abroad to earn money. The influx of foreigners in various industries caused resentment among the Japanese, and the yakuza organizations they formed were feared by the locals. This is where the term "Yentowns" comes from, which expresses the Japanese people's dissatisfaction with the foreign population. This is the era that the film is about, and this is also the story of the "Yentowns in Yentown", as stated at the beginning of the film. A portion of the film is filled with a dark and brooding storyline, and in these shots, Shunji Iwai uses large cool tones as a base, but there are some highly saturated blocks of color present in the frame to create a strong contrast. For example, in the initial appearance of Liu Liangkui and his brother in the fight scene, the screen overall dim and fuzzy, where most of the lights show a cold blue color. But at the same time, some other light

sources in the scene show warm yellow, and at the same time, the gangsters head of the big red bandana, the red light from somewhere mapping out the spot irradiated in the neck of the person killed, red and blue block contrast is strong in the same picture and each other intertwined with each other, but also implies that The contrasting red and blue blocks are also intertwined in the same image, suggesting the confrontation and tension between the two forces. This strong color contrast reinforces the impact of the story and the image.

The same color contrasts are used in the depiction of the whistleblower, who is depicted in a cool blue hue, but with a big red floral dress and bright lipstick lips that make for a very strong color contrast. The woman is fair-skinned and beautiful, but her behavior gives her a sense of madness and disorder. As a result of her snitching, Glico's secret is revealed. The prostitute takes up very little of the plot in the play, but her presence pushes the storyline forward. The reason why the director uses this technique to portray the prostitute is to contrast her image with that of Glico and others who are also on the fringe. At first, as a prostitute and an underclass person living on the edge of the city, Glico has never given up the goodness of her heart and her dreams, but the whistleblower snitches for money and has beautiful skin but spends her days in madness and confusion. On the contrary, in many of the scenes depicting Glico and Yajia, the director repeatedly uses highly saturated, warm-colored shots. For example, in the initial part of the film, when the two tell each other their stories, the light simulates the warmth of daylight coming in through the window, but it is stronger and brighter than real daylight, and the warmth of the light fills the entire frame, which is both warm and healing. Another example is when Glico sings on stage at the opening of the Yentown Club, with a highly saturated orange light enveloping her, which not only emphasizes her unique charisma, but also reflects her exuberant vitality. Similarly, when the story develops to the point where Glico and his team at the "Green Sky" repair shop accidentally get a tape and a large sum of money, they drive back to the open-air, dilapidated junkyard, and the scene is warm yellow, which signifies that their lives have been changed and that they will finally be able to live a "good life". This contrast of warm and cold colors in the film not only shows the development of the storyline and the change of the environment but also deeply portrays the image of different characters and the state of mind they had at that time.

Iwai Shunji is also very good at using backlighting, soft light, and silhouette light to shoot films. Backlighting refers to the direction of light and the camera shooting angle is the opposite, when the main light source is in the di-

rection of the backlight, from the camera's point of view, there will be a considerable part of the area in the shadow, which naturally presents a "near dark and far light" light structure. The contour of the subject can be emphasized, and at the same time, the attenuation of light from far to near on the subject will also be presented, backlighting can better present the light and shadow and light and dark levels so that the picture is more rich. Contour light also belongs to a kind of backlight, the light is usually irradiated from the side or rear, illuminating the contour edge of the subject, when irradiating the character can be rich in details of the character's face through light and shadow. The soft light will make the details of the subject become more blurred, the edges show more light halo, and the whole picture will look more hazy.

The soft light treatment in the film *Swallowtail Butterfly* makes many images beautiful and sets an unreal tone for the fictional story in the film. As the story itself is rather bizarre, a realistic picture might make the audience relate to real life. Shunji Iwai uses such a soft light treatment in order to isolate the audience from the film, making it feel as if they are watching the film through a piece of glass, which in turn enhances the credibility of the otherwise bizarre story. At the same time, this treatment also fits the romantic theme of the film. Despite the many scenes of the city on the edge of disrepair, the story itself is about the search for beauty in the midst of a brutal life, and the soft-lighting treatment adds a lot of color to such a story. In the film *Love Letter*, a lot of backlighting is used in places where light can penetrate such as doors or windows, giving the picture more emotions. The backlight and soft light effects are used for the episode of Fujii Itsuki's memories in the library, and warm colors are used to add a beautiful and dreamy atmosphere so that the audience feels as if they were in the ambiguous and vague feelings and emotions of adolescent boys and girls. The later scene in which the female Fujii Itsuki hallucinates in the hospital also uses backlighting, while the image presents cold colors, coupled with the effect of soft light, to create a sense of illusory unreality that responds to the character's feelings and change of heart. In the film *All About Lily Chou-chou* there is a great use of backlighting, for example in the classroom and piano room and in the scenes where the hero is on the grass. In order to make the light more visual and tangible, the object of the cigarette cake is used in many scenes, and without restraint or restraint. In order to present the texture of the complete natural light, they do not give the actor's face in the shadow side of the fill light, and in order to solve the problem of the actor's face in total darkness, they chose to give up the details of the highlights, that is to say, directly let the highlights part of the large overexposure. From the so-called

professional photography perspective, this treatment is very amateurish, but this backlighting overexposure of sunlight coupled with thin smoke and soft filters in front of the lens, so that the image is closer to the audience's memory or in a dream visual experience.

Iwai Shunji is very good at using film sense, overexposure to highlights, and low tolerance to shoot films. The film feel is often accompanied by graininess, which adds dimension and texture to the image; it also serves as a nostalgic mood and atmosphere. Tolerance refers to how many stops of exposure a camera can span between the darkest and brightest parts of a picture. If the brightest and darkest parts of a picture can be exposed normally, it is high tolerance. Conversely, it is low tolerance. A high tolerance means that more detail is retained in the highlights and shadows of the frame, while a low tolerance means the opposite. In the film *Hana & Alice*, many of the shots depicting or with the environment mostly show a low tolerance film style, for example, in the home of the heroine Hana and outside the house, most of the images have a bright saturation, with overexposure but forcibly adjusted to the normal exposure of the sense of distortion, the image of the color and light often exudes a pearly luster, giving the audience a sense of the era and illusory sense. Combined with the story of the film, it makes the audience feel as if they were there. With this kind of image processing, the audience is more able to practically experience the psychological feelings and daily life of the heroine, as well as letting the audience feel the naivety of an adolescent girl. With its many highlights overexposed and grainy shots, the film *All About Lily Chou-chou* is a picture of millennialism that seems to take the viewer back to the texture of home video shot on DV more than two decades ago, adding the necessary documentary quality to a film with a touch of realism.

6. Conclusion

This paper examines the visual aesthetics of Japanese director Shunji Iwai. His visual aesthetics are manifested in three main areas, which are the blending of hue and saturation, the use of light, overexposure, and the sense of film. These are manifested in different ways in each of his four major works. In the film *Love Letter*, the use of color tone is mainly reflected in the contrast between memories and reality. Different color tones can bring different emotional feelings to the audience, and at the same time, the degree of feelings expressed by high and low saturation is also different. In the film, the low saturated cold color represents reality, giving people a kind of indifferent and sad feeling; the high saturated warm color represents memories, representing warmth and beauty. Meanwhile,

when depicting the memory part, the visual effect of soft light is used in the picture, which makes the beautiful and dreamy mood go up a level. The use of backlighting is also reflected in the way the female Fujii Itsuki hallucinates in the hospital, the use of cool colors and backlighting and overexposure of the form to reflect the sense of illusion, portraying the inner thoughts of the characters. Most of the low saturated color tones in the film reflect a pure and beautiful film style, which conforms to the slow and delicate narrative. In the film *Swallowtail Butterfly*, the contrast of warm and cool colors is used in specific scenes, which will appear in the same picture at the same time, presenting the contrast and conflict obviously. Warm and cold tones and saturation are also inseparable, and are often used to portray characters in different environments and different moods. The film also has a lot of soft lighting effects to make the images aesthetically pleasing, which sets an unreal tone for the fictional story of the film. The soft lighting feels like the viewer is watching the film through a pane of glass, which enhances the believability of the otherwise bizarre story. The treatment also fits in with the romantic theme of the film, and despite the many scenes of the city on the edge of decay, the story itself, which is about finding beauty in the midst of a brutal life, adds a lot of color to the tale. The film *All About Lily Chou-chou* uses a lot of film and exposure shots, and in many of the scenes inside the school, soft light effects and smoke cakes are added to maximize the sense of unreality, making the images closer to the visual experience that the audience remembers or in their dreams. In the film *Hana*

& *Alice*, the low-latitude film style is utilized in many scenes where the environment needs to be highlighted. The images have a vibrant saturation. Overexposure and value adjustments give the image a pearly sheen.

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