

# Death Aesthetics in Japanese Love Movies

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## ABSTRACT

Death, as the destination of life, has been the ultimate proposition of people's repeated thinking and research since ancient times. Japan is one of the countries with the strongest expression of death culture and aesthetics of death. Extremely fierce and beautiful and sad deaths are reflected in a large number of Japanese cultural works. Among them, the huge contradiction and contrast between the aesthetic love and death images in Japanese movies are the focus of attention. Therefore, this article selects some representative Japanese love movies with death as the theme or death imagery and uses content analysis to study the aesthetic expression of death in its narrative. First, through the integration and combing of the death images that appear in the works, the narrative function of death images in movies is explored, and the construction of death aesthetics in Japanese love movies is understood. Finally, the author analyzes the reasons for the contradiction between Japanese aesthetic love and death images and believes that the view of love in Japanese love movies originates from the penetration of death culture. Through the above research, the author believes that Japanese culture, especially the culture of death, has a profound influence on Japanese love movies.

**Keywords:** *Japanese romantic movies, Death aesthetics, Death imagery, Narrative function, Aesthetic function.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For a long time, death is something that most people fear. It is believed that death is the end of life's journey. Therefore, in daily life, people and things about "death" are rarely mentioned, and even classified as taboo terms. However, in Japan, due to the influence of the geographical environment and national history and culture, the local people believe that death is a common trivial matter, and their attitude towards death is more frank and calm. Of course, for this reason, the suicide rate in Japanese society is also high. For the Japanese, death is another continuation and eternal existence of life, but it is actually another form of life. It is precise because of the Japanese people's appreciation and reverence for death that the cultural products created in this cultural context almost show the basically consistent and prominent aesthetic characteristics of death.

Compared with most countries, Japan's attitude towards death is already very different. What's even more surprising is that when telling beautiful and romantic love stories, the narratives and descriptions of death in literature and film, and television works

have not been reduced. In addition, love works in Mainland China have been criticized for some deaths such as car accidents and abortions. Therefore, through the analysis of the aesthetics of death in Japanese love movies, we can explore the way of showing, processing, and expressing death in Japanese movies, so as to explore the relationship between Japanese culture and image representation.

For the research on the subject of the aesthetics of death in Japanese movies, there is currently a lack of targeted theoretical works in foreign academic circles. In recent years, the research perspectives on this topic in the journal literature are mostly limited to the field of literature. There is a lack of targeted research on the rich expression methods and death elements in Japanese movies.

Therefore, this article takes the death aesthetics in Japanese love movies as the discussion object, and supplements the parts that lack attention in the academic circles. This article is mainly divided into three parts: death image, narrative function, and thematic model, and it discusses the following issues:

- How does "death aesthetics" appear in Japanese love movies? What kind of images

are there? What is the metaphor for these images?

- What role does "death" play in Japanese love movies? Is there a fixed narrative pattern?
- Why are love and death so closely connected in Japanese movies? Through the narrative that combines love and death, what kind of values and view of life and death do the creators want to convey?

By analyzing these issues, this article has an in-depth understanding of the aesthetic characteristics of Japanese love movies, relatively mature and fixed emotional expression models, and more open and developing concepts and understandings. It provides a reference for the narrative and presentation of the sensitive section of death in mainland Chinese films and creates works with more cultural connotations and more artistic sense.

## **2. THE AESTHETIC FUNCTION OF DEATH IN JAPANESE LOVE MOVIES — THE IMAGE OF DEATH**

In some highly expressionist films, some deaths after formalization are in sharp contrast with the ugly death phenomena in reality, which have aesthetic value. In the film, death has transcended the status quo, form, and state of death in reality, and has manifested itself as the sublimation of metaphysical beauty. This is the director's ultimate pursuit of beauty. It not only once again washes the audience's fear of death, but also a reverie and interpretation that endows death with beauty.

### **2.1 Sakura**

As we all know, the Japanese love sakura. The flowering period of the cherry blossoms is about one week, the scenery is beautiful when the flowers bloom, and the flowers fall rapidly and abnormally. The psychological gap brought to the Japanese by this directly fits their national aesthetic concept. Therefore, images of cherry blossoms appear in almost every Japanese movie, and the beauty of the sorrows that the Japanese appreciate is extremely vividly interpreted by the fallen cherry blossoms. Therefore, the cherry blossom has become the most nationally characteristic death image symbol in Japanese love movies.

The cherry blossom scene in the movie "Doll" can be described as impressive. Director Takeshi Kitano made full use of the four seasons of Japan in this film to tell the audience three emotional and twists and turns of a love story. As the main line of the movie,

"Burning Red Leaves" revolves around a couple looking for love memories. There are two scenes in the movie of a couple walking under cherry blossoms. The floating cherry blossoms contain a sense of impermanence, implying a life that is about to die. Especially at the beginning, under the cherry blossom trees on both sides of the road, the two people walked aimlessly and aimlessly. The falling cherry blossoms heralded the love they could never go back and the fate of death that they could never escape.

### **2.2 Snow**

The Japanese love of snow comes from several aspects: first, the snow is white, and the snow-covered land gives people a pure natural beauty; the second is that snowflakes are perishable, and the beauty of regret brought about by their short-lived existence conforms to the Japanese aesthetics; the third is that the ice and snowmelt, and while the snow water nourishes the earth, it also purifies the body and mind of people. Snow is regarded as the hope of life in a way. As a result, in Japanese movies, Snow assumes the function of death imagery.

Among them, the most poetic expression of the death image of snow is "Love Letter" directed by Shunji Iwai. The snow in the film not only explains the time of the story, but also connects the stories of the three main characters, and at the same time implies the final ending of the characters.

First of all, the whole story originated in the snow. Otoi Fujii climbed the snow mountain and encountered misfortune. This accident opened a long-lost secret love. Next is the heroine Bozi. The snow disaster took away her lover. Bozi's longing for her lover seems to make her have nowhere to escape. At the beginning of the film, Bozi lay in the snow and the heavy snow seemed to swallow her, then Bozi went down the mountain to attend the boyfriend's anniversary memorial ceremony, so the vast snow scene expressed a feeling of loneliness and solemnity. At the end of the story, Bo Zi walked out of the shadow of losing her lover. When she mustered up the courage to face the snow-capped mountains, it meant that the originally closed state of mind gradually turned into relief.

The film sets snow as a clue. On the one hand, it exerts a narrative function to connect the emotional experience and fate of the three protagonists; on the other hand, it reveals the aesthetic concept of sorrow pursued by the Japanese nation. Although the protagonists in the story have regrets, it is precise because these imperfections are set off by the holy

snowflakes that the beauty of life and love is blooming.

### **2.3 *Waterfall***

In the traditional culture of the Japanese people, due to the influence of a certain Buddhist culture, the Japanese highly approve of the function of death to purify the spirit. According to the records in Japan's "Kojiki" and many folklore myths, the Japanese usually choose water as a way to purify themselves [1].

Therefore, under the influence of the Japanese subconscious, the water in Japanese movies is often linked to death. Natural sceneries such as rain, the sea, and waterfalls have become the images of death that tend to be expressed in the movies.

The movie "Paradise Lost" is adapted from one of the best-selling novels by Junichi Watanabe, the waterfall scenes added to it indicate the emotional status and destiny of the two. At the beginning of the movie, the cascading waterfall is gradually and clearly presented in front of the audience from haziness, then the camera lens is slowly moved closer until it is close to the water surface, and the film title appears on the continuously flowing ripples. The water pattern remains and the film title disappears. The movie takes this transition, the hero and heroine after the affair enters the audience's sight. The waterfall at the beginning can be regarded as the external manifestation of the strong erotic desires of the two, besides it also implies the situation where the two are unable to extricate themselves from falling into the emotional whirlpool.

At the end of the film, after the heroes and heroines have both died in love, the waterfall reappears. From the frozen state to the gradual flow, the shots of the screen gradually pull out from near to far and freeze on the flow of the waterfall. The frozen waterfall symbolizes that the series of emotional entanglements surrounding the two have finally come to an end, even though the solution of this problem ended in the death of the two. The waterfall that breaks through the ice and spews again is to purify the sins committed by their actions flow of water, it also implies that the similar emotional desires in the long river of human life will not end, and there are still many men and women who will still be deeply involved.

## **3. THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION OF "DEATH" IN MOVIES**

Death is always in an infinite time dimension and a certain space range, unfolding the end of a finite life. In the narrative time and space of the movie, time and space are specially set as an infinite segment, and death is the special symbol of this segment.

"It has become a necessary structure in narrative art. It has the structural function of regulating the entire story, grasping the narrative rhythm, and integrating the logical schedule of event development." [2] Death serves as a symbol of the film's narrative time, allowing the story to continue to develop.

### **3.1 *Death as a Cause***

The first is based on the death of one of the two lovers as the cause; the rest is immersed in it and finally starts a new life in mourning for the lover.

For example, "Love Letter", regarded as the representative work of the new film movement in Japan, tells the story of Hiroko Watanabe, who walked out of the haze through her boyfriend's letters of the same name after her boyfriend's death.

The death element in the film involves two generations, the hero and the heroine's father. The protagonist passed away accidentally due to mountaineering, and his departure is the premise for the film's story to unfold. The significance of his death is not only to uncover an ignorant love but also to trigger people's thinking on how to face the reality of the life of the lost lover. In contrast, the death of the heroine's father is easily ignored by the audience. The director has spent a lot of effort to show the impact of the heroine's father's death on the relatives, and this impact is constantly being amplified as the heroine grows. It shows that the "Love Letter" uses the death of the two to develop an in-depth discussion of death: how to face the departure of loved ones when death suddenly comes to you.

Without gorgeous production and thrilling plot, the film "Love Letter" exudes a faint breath of death. Although life is impermanent, the world is unpredictable, and the loved one has passed away, but after all, the memory of love is left behind, which encourages the living people to continue to love bravely.

### **3.2 *Death as an End***

In Japanese romance movies, the ending of the hero's and heroines' deaths due to accidents or car accidents has become a formula and routine. In the Japanese movie "Dolls", not only are there no "lovers who will eventually get married", but each love ends with death.

"...In Japanese novels and dramas, the knot of 'Happy Reunion' is rarely seen" [3]. In the Japanese movie "Dolls", each love ends with death. Love and death are ever-changing themes of literature and art, although they have never been contradicted expressed as in Japanese literature. There are special "love dramas" and "marriage dramas" in traditional Japanese dramas, while in modern literature, from Kawabata Yasunari to Mishima Yukio, from Oe Kenzaburo to Murakami Haruki, love always goes with death.

Kitano Takeshi has repeatedly expressed this contradiction in past movies, and he took it one step further in "Dolls": Love and death are entangled, death shows the beauty of love, and love has the despair and sadness of death. The entire film "Doll" is an aesthetic treatment of death and a tragic expression of love. On the one hand, there is a poetic picture full of classical meaning; on the other hand, the cold death and gloomy reality that contradict this, the warmth of love, and the cruel combination of death produce a unique artistic conception. It is in this sense that "Dolls" expresses the beauty of sadness, thus realizing the stimulation from the visual sense organs to the strong shock of inner emotions. The characters in "Dolls" have no reason to die. However, because of death, love has a deeper mood.

### **3.3 *Death as a New Birth***

The third is that the two parties who fell in love were unable to resist the powerful secular forces and finally chose to die together. The heroes and heroines in "Paradise Lost" give up their lives for love to highlight the value of death and the true essence of love. The negative emotion of death is only used as a background, and its real purpose is to highlight the power and rebirth of love.

In Watanabe Junichi's opinion, if Kuki and Rinko choose to get married, no matter how beautiful love is, it will be destroyed, but death can preserve love forever, which is the best way to sublimate love. Although death brings the body to an end, the spirit of love can be transformed into eternity. When love and social ethics are incompatible, death is the best

choice, but death is also their helpless choice. When love has reached its extreme, personal strength and family constraints cannot make love sublimate or maintain it. Therefore, only by choosing the extreme way of death can love to be eternal.

To prevent this sad beauty from being destroyed by the ugly reality of death, their way of death is set to take poison that does not destroy their physical appearance. The ending film director uses an aesthetic shooting technique to show the final sex scenes of the heroes and heroines. They flirt with each other with blood-red poisonous wine. When they are close to the top of sensual pleasure, their eyes become blurred and twinkling. At this time, the film shows the illusion that they appear at the same time, and they walk in the snow holding hands to count the life process of this life.

Finally, after the extreme enjoyment of eros, both lie naked in the snow and die. The director integrates the relationship between love and death into a dialectical unity: death is the satisfaction of the highest desire for love. Only death can save love, so they use death to achieve the eternal life of love.

## **4. THEMATIC PATTERN ON LOVE AND DEATH**

The customs and customs of a country directly affect its citizens' outlook on life, world outlook, and values, including the outlook on love. In literary works, death usually occurs when the protagonist's love consciousness is just ascertained, which is usually expressed as a sacrifice of love. This kind of tragic art can better show the Japanese people's pursuit of all things and not greedy, and only a short-lived life can be a beautiful life attitude. "In the eyes of many artists, death dissolves desire on the one hand. In addition, it realizes all desires, including eros, because death is the highest satisfaction of eros"[4]. In extremist Japan, this idea of seeing each other's sacrifice as the greatest love is deeply rooted in Japanese culture.

### **4.1 *Memorial of Love***

In the Japanese movie "Love Letter", the famous film "Love Letter" by Japanese director Shunji Iwai is a poignant story about love, memory, and mourning. The story revolves around finding love in the memory.

Throughout the whole film, memory is a very important part of it, especially the memory of the dead. The flashback of memory and reality constructs

the overall plot of the film, and the past love and youth are gradually clear and resurrected in the protagonist's memories. It is this remembrance of the deceased that confirms two unforgettable loves.

Although the protagonist has passed away, love is a kind of spirit. It does not exist due to "life" and does not end due to "death". It is an eternity. The film eulogizes this kind of pure love on the spiritual level. At the same time, the love resurrected in the memory is also regarded as a kind of unattainable desire. The pursuit of this desire embodies the Japanese nation's sorrowful spirit. Japan's sorrow spirit embodies a preference for death. This preference can be seen in Japanese traditional literature. Isoda Koichi once said that the aesthetics of the Japanese nation is a kind of martyrdom aesthetics, it regards death and disappearance as inevitable. The fate of avoidance shows cruel poetry in this inevitable destruction of fate and believes that only such beauty can move people's hearts.

#### **4.2 *The Passing of Love***

The beauty of "Doll" in Japanese culture is consistent with the aesthetic tendency of the Japanese nation. The Japanese people admire the changing scenery of the four seasons and the beauty of the short-lived cherry blossoms. Although the cherry blossoms are extremely gorgeous when they are in full bloom, the time is very short. This shows the Japanese people's tragic understanding of beauty: everything is fleeting. However, they think that in fact, this is the most authentic feature of life. Death is the highest nothingness of life, and nothingness is the highest suspended state of the spirit, close to the realm of religion and poetry. Therefore, death represents a kind of spiritual beauty and soul sublimation. Death is a symbol of beauty, and it represents a poetic way of spiritual existence" [6].

"Doll" is also the expression of the beauty of those things that will eventually fall into silence. For example, at the end of the film, Matsumoto and Gongtian fell off the cliff, and the screen switched to: in the middle of the snow-covered cliff, an old tree, Matsumoto and Gongtian were still hanging like two puppets at the two ends of the tree and died, beside the cliff. The light red sunrise is rising. The two of them struggled to get here, and it seemed that only in such a cruel and decisive beauty could their love be fulfilled. There is also the scene where Tanaka and Yan Jing watched the sea of flowers together. It was the first and last time that they were so close together. The sweet expression of the lover and the bright and

beautiful flowers are close at hand, and the happiness of a moment of life points to eternity.

#### **4.3 *Extreme Love***

The hero and heroine at the end of "Paradise Lost" uses an extreme way-death, which makes love sublime and eternal, Watanabe Junichi said: "Love, especially the peak of love, cannot be sustained forever, but death can make the peak of love solidify into eternity" [5]. Watanabe Junichi does not approve of the traditional marriage system. He believes that true love exists only in extramarital relationships. If people choose the latter between family and nature, they will be confronted with the entire society, even human morality, and the legal system. This is too heavy for a person, and this kind of confrontation is impossible to succeed in modern background. Therefore, the death of love becomes a reasonable ending. The protagonist dies at the peak of love, and this can make love never fade.

In "Paradise Lost", love is the center of death. It is difficult for Kuki and Rinko to choose between primitive instincts and traditional morality. In the end, the two decided to be loyal to their love, using the extreme way of death to make love sublimated and eternal. Absolute love exists, but it is extremely short-lived. People want to have lasting love, then only at the peak of love can it become eternal.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

As a question that human beings think about forever, what death brings to mankind is not only an inquiry about the length of life but also an inquiry about the width and thickness of life. Therefore, no matter which country's movie is, the expression of death in its image is derived from real life, and it is the reflection and perception of life by human beings. It is worth noting that the meticulous Japanese filmmakers endow the enjoyment of death with beauty to a certain extent. They take the initiative to approach death and portray death in detail, which not only raises death to the height of aesthetics but also fully demonstrates the Japanese nation's cognition of death to the audience.

Death and love are always the two main themes of artistic creation preferences, and Japanese movies are no exception. However, whether it is an aesthetically romantic pure love story or an alternative love that is intertwined with passions, there is a certain extreme in the unique aesthetic orientation of Japanese creators. Japanese movies often like to introduce death while telling love stories,

which makes the movies show a sad aesthetic tendency. The main purpose of their creation is to use the cruelty and uniqueness of death to make a positive answer to the value of love.

No matter what type of love is described in the movie, the audience will eventually fall into a meditation on the value and meaning of love because of death. Japanese movies try to tell the loftiness and greatness of love through death, and it seems to them that only incomplete love can truly highlight the invaluable human emotion.

Japanese love films inspire people's attitudes towards death and love through a series of creative techniques. It can be said that the aesthetics of death has become a major feature of images that cannot be ignored in Japanese movies. It has a lot of things to show off and learn from, in addition, some many criticisms and problems require the attention of film creators from other countries. To study the aesthetics of death in Japanese movies, the most fundamental thing is to comprehend the respect and awe of death from it, to cherish life and cherish every day of life.

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This paper is independently completed by Huixian Chen.

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