

Death, Aging, and Ecology in *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983)

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Abstract: This study analyzes Shohei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983) through the lens of death, aging, and ecology. The film centers on the ubasute ritual, where elderly individuals are taken to a mountain to die, reflecting a pragmatic response to resource scarcity. By portraying death as a societal and ecological necessity, the film challenges modern views on aging and death. Nature is depicted as an active participant, symbolizing the cyclical processes of life and death. This interdisciplinary study combines perspectives from anthropology, cultural studies, and environmental philosophy to explore how the film frames death not just as an individual event, but as essential for community survival and ecological balance. Ultimately, the film critiques modern approaches to aging and sustainability.

Keywords: Death; Aging; Ecocriticism; Ubasute; The Ballad of Narayama



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M. Talha Altinkaya

Introduction

The Ballad of Narayama (1983) presents a compelling narrative about death, aging, and traditional relationships within the natural life cycle in a rural Japanese village. The film centers around the practice of ubasute, a tradition in which elderly members are taken to a mountain to die once they reach a certain age. The film delves into the complex dynamics of family, duty, and the relationship between humans and nature that underpin the practice of ubasute through the experiences of the main protagonist, Tatsuhei, and his mother, Orin, who is approaching the end of her life. The film underscores how human existence is profoundly intertwined with the cycles of nature at the same time. This relationship frames a mutual exchange, where the elderly surrender their bodies not as an act of suicide but as a gesture of making space for the newborns—both at the table and in life.

The film's core theme portrays death, which is physical, deeply sociological, and ecological. The community's survival strategy ritualizes death, wherein the elders must willingly sacrifice their lives to secure the well-being of younger generations. In this context, death is depicted as an ethical act. The Ballad of Narayama also highlights that death and aging are integral aspects of the life cycle, much like the cyclical nature of the changing seasons. In the film, nature

functions as a background, witness, and participant in the human struggle with mortality. The film highlights the inescapable link between human life and the environment. Beyond depicting these themes, *The Ballad of Narayama* raises fundamental questions about the ethics of aging, the value of human life, and the role of death in sustaining life, both socially and environmentally.

This interdisciplinary study of *The Ballad of Narayama* incorporates perspectives on anthropology, environmental philosophy, and cultural studies. Each discipline offers a distinct framework for interpreting the film's nuanced portrayal of death, aging, and the environment. From an anthropological viewpoint, the film's depiction of *ubasute* provides an opportunity to explore how different cultures ritualize death and aging as integral parts of their social structures. As Ruby (1971) argues, cinema should aim to capture social realities and cultural values through an approach that extends beyond traditional ethnographies. In this regard, as I will discuss in the following sections of this study, death rituals express varying meanings across different cultures. In the film, abandoning the elderly by taking them to the mountain symbolizes the community's survival mechanisms in the face of life's hardships. It reflects the cultural norms and ethical frameworks that govern how the aging population is integrated into or excluded from society. Anthropology, particularly within this study, enables an analysis of how such practices reflect

deeper social values and how the relationship between individuals and the collective manifests in traditional societies.

Environmental philosophy and ecocriticism also play a pivotal role in analyzing how the film situates death as part of a natural cycle. *The Ballad of Narayama* encourages viewers to reflect on the ethical relationship between humanity and nature by presenting human life as deeply intertwined with ecological balance. In this sense, the film aligns with Macdonald's (2004) argument that cinema, by focusing on the relationship between humans and the natural world, can effectively express environmental concerns and engage in meaningful discussions of environmental ethics. In this context, death is portrayed not simply as a biological event but as a crucial component of the ecosystem, where the sacrifice of the elderly ensures the community's sustainability. This perspective opens up discussions on sustainability and the moral implications of viewing life and death through an ecological lens, themes that resonate across many scientific disciplines today. Here, the film serves as a significant example of the human-environment interactions noted by Ivakhiv (2013), who critiques anthropocentric worldviews.

Cultural studies also examine the relationship between films and culture. As Norman Denzin states, “*Films are cultural and symbolic forms and can be used to discover and reveal important characteristics of social life.*” (Winter & Nestler, 2011, s. 231) In this context, cultural

studies enable an assessment of the broader social implications of *The Ballad of Narayama*. By analyzing how death and aging are culturally represented in a rural Japanese village, the film serves as a crucial example for exploring how traditional practices related to aging and mortality intersect with contemporary social views. Cultural studies help situate the film within global debates on aging, elder care, and how societies navigate the ethics of life and death amid environmental and economic pressures.

By integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, this study will examine how *The Ballad of Narayama* portrays death, a significant cultural and ecological event, as both a social and ecological necessity. It will offer insights not only into Japanese traditions but also into broader global concerns regarding aging populations, sustainability, and the ethics of living within a fragile environment. Three main theoretical frameworks—'environmental criticism,' 'the ethics of aging,' and 'sociocultural views of death'—will be employed to analyze *The Ballad of Narayama* and explore these considerations. These approaches provide the key lenses through which the film's treatment of death, aging, and the environment can be fully understood.

Method

In *The Ballad of Narayama*, nature plays a pivotal role in the *ubasute* ritual, in which the elderly are taken to the mountains to die. This practice reflects the community's response to

ecological limits while highlighting the interdependence of human life and natural resources. From an ecocritical perspective—which examines the relationship between humans and the environment, particularly how nature shapes cultural practices and ethical decisions—the film critically reflects on resource scarcity, sustainability, and balancing individual lives with ecological needs. Likewise, aging in the film is not merely a biological process but a socially regulated one, governed by strict norms that dictate when the elderly must make way for the survival of younger generations. This situation raises fundamental ethical questions: What determines the value of life in the context of limited resources? How does society justify the exclusion of the elderly?

Another key framework is a sociocultural approach to death, focusing on how societies construct rituals and ethical codes surrounding death. In the film—and in Japanese culture as well as many other cultures—death is ritualized as a socially accepted necessity rather than an individual tragedy. This framework, which situates death within a broader cultural and social context, provides insight into how *The Ballad of Narayama* reflects traditional Japanese beliefs.

In this context, the following research questions guide this study:

- How does *The Ballad of Narayama* portray death as a social and ecological necessity?
- In what ways does the film reflect or critique ethical frameworks related to aging and death?
- Do the film's representations of nature and death contribute to a broader understanding of sustainability and resource management? If so, how?

- How does the film's portrayal of death challenge or address traditional and modern interpretations of mortality?

This paper will analyze *The Ballad of Narayama* through these interdisciplinary focuses, situating the film within contemporary debates on aging, death, and sustainability while exploring its cultural and ecological implications.

Comparative Perspectives on Death and Aging Across Cultures

The Ballad of Narayama reflects on various other traditional death and aging rituals worldwide. Death is one of the oldest phenomena that coexists with life. Philosophically, if one can speak of a living being, one can also discuss the existence of the idea of death. Death is the end of our vital biological activities. However, this idea belongs to modern societies. Death has undergone philosophical and factual changes in different phases of history, just like in the film.

“What do we know of death; what is death? According to experience, it is the stopping of a behavior, the stopping of expressive movements and of physiological movements or processes that are enveloped by these expressive movements and dissimulated by them (...) Death is the irremediable gap: the biological movements lose all dependence in relation to signification, to expression. Death is decomposition; it is the no-response [sans-response].” (Levinas, 2000, s. 11)

This perception, which varies across cultures and historical contexts, may even differ within the various regions of a single country. As depicted in the film, in some primitive societies, children are seen only as indirect and secondary social group members until they learn to respect their elders. The elderly hold primary importance within the community. For example, among the Sakai people in Indonesia, “two different ideas about the death of friends and relatives coexist: 1. That the spirit of the dead can do evil, even if it is not a conscious evil because death is contagious. 2. A firm belief in the idea that there are spirits present before someone dies” (Bruhl, 2006a, pp. 226-227).

Similarly, Bruhl notes that in some Australian communities, beliefs persist that the dead can still be contacted even after their physical disappearance. People take significant measures to avoid such contact and its associated experiences. The burial process, especially on the first day and in the initial hours after death, can lead to the belief that the deceased is still present somewhere (Levy-Bruhl, 2006b, pp. 120-121).

The concept of ritualized death and the treatment of the elderly, as presented in the film, is not unique to Japan; similar practices are found in societies where ecological constraints and resource scarcity shape social structures and attitudes toward the elderly. One of the most well-known parallels comes from the history of the Inuit people in the Arctic region. When the survival

of the community was threatened by environmental conditions, food shortages, or resource depletion, Inuit elders would sometimes voluntarily leave the group, venturing into the freezing wilderness to face death alone. This act was understood as a form of altruistic self-sacrifice intended to reduce the burden on the community and ensure the survival of younger generations. As Rasmussen notes, “it is a general custom that old folk no longer able to provide for themselves commit suicide by hanging. Life is short, and we must make the most of it” (Rasmussen, 1999, p. 225). Similar to the depiction of *ubasute* in *The Ballad of Narayama*, the Inuit practice of abandoning elders is not seen as cruel but rather as a pragmatic response to ecological pressures driven by an ethic of social survival.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in African tribes and other cultures, where environmental challenges often shape social structures and practices. However, when resources become scarce due to drought or other ecological challenges, and the care of frail or elderly members strains the group's survival, social practices and rituals emerge to reduce the community's responsibility for elderly care. In extreme cases, these practices lead to the ritualized exclusion of elderly members from community life. These traditions, much like the *ubasute* practice depicted in the film, are not perceived as disrespectful to the elderly but as necessary measures to ensure the community's survival when resources are insufficient to sustain both the young and the old.

Mauss observes a similar understanding of death among Australians, where deaths are often interpreted in magical or religious terms rather than through the lens of modern biological science. Violent deaths, such as those resulting from injury or murder, are considered everyday occurrences. In New Zealand, however, deaths associated with sorcery or suggestion are typically viewed as moral or religious events, often linked to notions of sin. In contrast, in Australia, deaths related to sin are rare and usually involve violations of totemic laws or consumption of forbidden foods. For instance, young people who consume the meat of a forbidden animal are believed to be chastised to death by the spirit of that animal. Such events serve as a transition to deaths caused by magical means. Thus, moral and religious beliefs can also lead to death through suggestion among Australians (Mauss, 2006, pp. 411-412). Similarly, Baudrillard notes that in "wild" communities, the concept of death is not rooted in biological terms, and this phenomenon varies across cultures.

"Savages have no biological concept of death. Or rather, the biological fact, that is, death, birth or disease, everything that comes from nature and that we accord the privilege of necessity and objectivity, quite simply has no meaning for them. This is absolute disorder, since it cannot be symbolically exchanged, and what cannot be symbolically exchanged constitutes a mortal danger for the group. They are unreconciled, unexpiated, sorcerous and hostile forces that prowl around the soul and the body, that stalk the living and the dead; defunct, cosmic energies that the group

was unable to bring under control through exchange. We have de-socialised death by overturning bio-anthropological laws, by according it the immunity of science and by making it autonomous, as individual fatality.” (Baudrillard, 2017, p. 151-152)

In all these cases, death is ritualized not as a personal or individual end, but as a social necessity, often reflecting the interconnectedness of life in ecologically fragile environments. Whether in the Japanese mountains, the Arctic, or the African savannah, death becomes a collective experience framed within cultural practices that emphasize the unity of life and death, community and environment. By providing a cinematic portrayal of this complex dynamic, *The Ballad of Narayama* stands out as a powerful artifact for understanding how traditional societies have historically addressed the ethics of death and aging.

The intersection of aging and death in traditional societies frequently raises questions about the delicate balance between ecological necessity and social ethics. Across cultures, the treatment of the elderly and the rituals surrounding death are shaped by both environmental pressures and social values, revealing the profound significance of these traditions in shaping societal views. In societies like the one depicted in *The Ballad of Narayama*, the elderly are viewed either as applicable or as a burden, a perspective closely connected to the community’s ability to sustain itself within limited resources.

These cross-cultural comparisons of death highlight a common ecological logic underlying the social view of elderly people in traditional societies. In harsh environments where survival depends on careful resource management, the elderly—especially those who can no longer contribute to the community's productivity, such as disabled individuals or even twin children in some instances—are seen as part of a cycle in which death is an accepted, though difficult, aspect of life. For these communities, the decision to ritually exclude oneself and cease being a social being, as represented in the film, is viewed as part of a collective effort to preserve the group's viability. As with the examples of the Inuit and other traditional societies cited earlier, aging populations face ecological constraints. The concept of voluntary death due to resource scarcity reflects the community's reliance on careful resource management. In this context, elders who can no longer contribute to survival efforts do not see their death as an end but as a continuation of their lineage, choosing to leave the group for the greater good. In some cultures, where elders are revered as the bearers of cultural wisdom, ecological challenges create a tension between survival and respect for elders. However, in both cases, old age and death are socially integrated processes, wherein these societies acknowledge the ethical dimensions of aging while respecting the environmental limitations they face.

These examples reveal that in traditional societies, death and aging are often deeply embedded within ecological cycles. In environments where survival hinges on the careful

management of resources, the elderly are seen not only as individuals nearing the end of their lives but as part of a broader ecological process in which death is essential for life to continue. This cyclical view of life and death contrasts sharply with many modern, mainly Western, perspectives on aging, prioritizing individual longevity and often emphasizing life extension at any cost, regardless of the impact on society or the environment. From this standpoint, *The Ballad of Narayama* challenges contemporary views on aging and death, encouraging viewers to consider how societies might navigate the ethics of life and death in a world of finite resources. The film and the cultural practices it portrays also prompt reflection on the sustainability of aging populations, especially in modern societies facing an aging demographic, ecological crises, and the rising social and economic costs of elder care. By presenting death as a social and ecological process, the film forces us to rethink how societies can address the growing tension between the value of individual lives and the survival of the collective.

Cinematic Representations of Death

Death is not only a subject or theme but, in some cases, a genre or subgenre utilized across many art forms, including cinema. In poetry, as Hillkirk (1982) notes, it is a fundamental theme often explored in literature. In dramatic and fictional films, as Hakola (2021) argues, it serves as a frequently dramatized narrative element. In documentary films, death is an authentic

representational tool that forces viewers to reflect on their cultural and social understandings of mortality. Aaron (2014), in his comprehensive study of death in mainstream cinema, observes that death is both exaggerated and downplayed in twentieth and twenty-first century films. Similarly, Niemiec and Schulenberg (2011) assert that death is one of the most common themes in cinema. According to them, such films often foster a closer relationship between audiences and life itself, sometimes reducing anxiety about death. They argue that these films typically depict character development, which serves this purpose.

From a historical perspective, death began to appear in the narratives of early cinema. However, it was not until the 1940s, with the introduction of sound, that death became a more prevalent theme in the industry.

"Throughout the 1940s, films about the afterdeath experience held a powerful emotional impact, though often overlaid with sentimentality. What they told us was that beyond death exists another world, or worlds, in many ways similar to our own. The films imply, though never explicitly state, that all these worlds are projections of mind..." (Lyn & Tom, 2013, s. 28)

In the 1940s, cinema began influencing audiences with films exploring life after death deeply. These films typically incorporated emotional elements and delved into the possibility of other worlds and transcendental existence after death. Particularly during World War II, such films

were intended to provide solace to those grieving for relatives lost in the war. Among the notable films of this period, *It Is a Wonderful Life* (1946) stands out as a production that questions the value of life and the existence of an afterlife. However, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, there was a decline in films focusing on the theme of life after death. In the 1970s, this genre experienced a revival fueled by spiritual movements, a growing interest in Eastern teachings, and the popularization of psychedelic experiences. Buddhist teachings, which spread to the West following the invasion of Tibet, along with texts like *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, contributed to a broader contextualization of death and afterlife experiences. Psychedelic experiences and research on near-death experiences also shaped this era. One of the most significant examples of this genre in the 1980s was *Resurrection* (1980), which explored the theme of rebirth after death. The film's protagonist, after experiencing death, returns to life with a new consciousness and gains healing powers. This film is notable for its modern interpretation of spiritual awakening and transcendental experiences, updating themes explored in earlier films. Today, the theme of death and its aftermath has expanded beyond the fantasy or horror genres and is now examined from broader perspectives, including spiritual teachings. This position reflects cinema's ongoing engagement with humanity's deepest concerns about death (Lyn & Tom, 2013).

In this context, *The Ballad of Narayama* can be considered part of this long cinematic tradition that frequently addresses the themes of death and aging. However, it distinguishes itself by depicting these themes in a rural, ecologically oriented context. As seen in cinema history, films that explore death often do so within cultural, temporal, or philosophical frameworks. By examining cinematic representations of death and considering how themes such as death and aging have been treated in cinema, we can better appreciate *The Ballad of Narayama's* unique contribution to the cinematic portrayal of mortality and the ethics surrounding aging. Its distinctive approach lies in its ecological and rural framing, setting it apart from other films in this tradition.

Although numerous examples in cinema history focus on death and aging, one film that bears thematic similarities to *The Ballad of Narayama* is Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal* (1957). In Bergman's film, death is personified, and the narrative revolves around a knight's existential confrontation with mortality during the Black Death. Like *The Ballad of Narayama*, *The Seventh Seal* explores the inevitability of death. However, while Bergman's film focuses on death's spiritual and philosophical aspects, treating it as a personal confrontation, Imamura's film takes a more pragmatic approach, emphasizing survival and ecological constraints. In *The Seventh Seal*, death is portrayed as a mysterious, inevitable force that challenges human understanding. In contrast, in *The Ballad of Narayama*, death is treated as a natural, traditional process necessary for survival in a subsistence-based society.

Another significant comparison is Akira Kurosawa's *Ikiru* (1952), a film rooted in a similar cultural context as Imamura's, also dealing with death and aging but from a more personal and modern perspective. In *Ikiru*, the protagonist, an aging bureaucrat, confronts the meaning of his life after being diagnosed with a terminal illness. Unlike *The Ballad of Narayama*, *Ikiru* portrays death as an individual reckoning, highlighting the isolation of modern life and the existential search for personal meaning in the face of impending death. While *The Ballad of Narayama* centers on the relationship between death and ecological sustainability, *Ikiru* explores modern death in an urban, industrialized environment, where the protagonist's efforts to leave a lasting legacy are more symbolic than ecological.

A more recent film, Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012), also focuses on aging and death, engaging with similar themes in *The Ballad of Narayama*. *Amour* tells the story of an elderly couple, where one spouse succumbs to illness, forcing the other to confront the painful realities of death. By concentrating on the emotional and relational aspects of aging and death, *Amour* provides a deeply personal depiction of mortality in the modern world. In contrast, *The Ballad of Narayama* situates death within the broader social and environmental balance context, where the decision to die is not framed by individual pain or love but rather by a social and ecological imperative.

What sets *The Ballad of Narayama* apart from these films is its treatment of death as an ecological necessity, a natural part of a process intertwined with the community's survival and its relationship with the environment. While films such as *The Seventh Seal*, *Ikiru*, and *Amour* emphasize individual or existential responses to death, *The Ballad of Narayama* adopts a highly anthropological perspective. It is rooted in traditional practices that reflect the demands of a rural society, where aging is less about personal reflection and more about maintaining the cyclical balance of life and death essential for sustaining the group. In Imamura's narrative, death is not merely an end but a critical component of the ecological order.

In summary, *The Ballad of Narayama* fits into a broader cinematic tradition that examines death and aging, but its focus on the ecological dimension of death and the social ethics of survival sets it apart from other films in this genre.

Death, Aging, and Ecology in *The Ballad of Narayama*: An Ethical and Ecocritical Perspective

The central theme of *The Ballad of Narayama* is the traditional Japanese practice of *ubasute*, which serves as the foundation for the survival and social functioning of the village depicted in the film. *Ubasute*—the practice of abandoning the elderly in remote locations, often in the mountains—is portrayed not as an act of cruelty but as a necessary cultural phenomenon. The cultural logic behind *ubasute* reflects the belief that death is inevitable and integral to life. Having

completed their social and familial duties, the elderly voluntarily prepare to meet their end, relieving their families of the burden of supporting them. In this way, death is ritualized as part of a moral and ethical code that balances personal sacrifice with social well-being. Deeply rooted in Japanese folklore and rural traditions, this practice often emerged with limited food and resources, forcing communities to make difficult choices for collective survival (Mingren, 2024). The film uses helicopter shots to show the village's harsh conditions at high altitudes, with meters of snow and challenging terrain. Similarly, the movie opens with scenes of barn animals and the interconnectedness of life in the village, underscoring its socio-economic status.

Orin, the film's protagonist, fully accepts his fate as dictated by the *ubasute* tradition. His determination to fulfill this duty exemplifies how deeply embedded this ritual is in the cultural consciousness. Rather than resisting, Orin embraces the ritual as an honorable and inevitable consequence of his life, especially as his family grows and famine looms. In this matriarchal society, where women hold dominant roles, Orin's acceptance of death underscores that this practice is not viewed through the lens of modern individualism but as part of a collective responsibility to ensure the survival of future generations.

The cultural framework depicted in *The Ballad of Narayama* transforms the concept of death from a personal tragedy into a social event—a form of solidarity where the passing of the

elderly is necessary for the survival of the younger generation. The film serves as a powerful critique of contemporary approaches to death, particularly in comparison to modern societies that prioritize prolonging life at all costs. In *The Ballad of Narayama*, death is not something to be feared or avoided but something to be embraced for the good of the community. Imamura's portrayal of this practice reveals how cultural traditions surrounding aging and death are shaped by ecological and social factors that necessitate a collective approach to the inevitable end of life.

In this sense, death in *The Ballad of Narayama* is not merely a biological event but a ritualized process that plays a critical role in the survival of the community. The community's survival depends on maintaining a delicate balance between life and death, with the elderly expected to remove themselves to alleviate the pressure on limited resources voluntarily. For instance, Orin's act of breaking his teeth, a self-sacrifice to eat less food, is one of the most potent indicators of this concept. These sacrifices are significant within the film's narrative; as Rieger and Hofer note, "meaningful films can help recipients to cope with the fear of death, because these films can serve as an inspiration for generating meaning." (Rieger & Hofer, 2007, s. 3) *The Ballad of Narayama* functions as a meaningful film by confronting mortality and illustrating how individuals' deaths contribute to the survival of their community, thereby linking personal sacrifice to communal well-being.

In this sense, the film depicts death as an ecological necessity. This pragmatic approach underscores the connection between human life and the natural world, where death is understood as part of the cyclical processes that sustain the environment. For traditional societies, as portrayed in the film, life and death are inseparable, intertwined like two sides of the same coin. The film presents a holistic view of death, where dying is not perceived as an individual loss but as a crucial part of the more extensive ecological system that supports life. Using nature as the backdrop for the death ritual further reinforces this connection. The mountain where the elders are taken to die symbolizes isolation and integration with the natural world. By leaving the village and ascending the mountain, Orin and the other elders become part of the natural cycle of life and death, their passing ensuring the continued survival of the community. For the elders, this is an honorable act that preserves their lineage. In *The Ballad of Narayama*, death is essential to life, and the ritualization of death maintains the balance between the community and its environment. This situation contrasts modern depictions of death that focus on prolonging life at all costs, often ignoring ecological or social consequences.

In this context, the isolation depicted in the film suggests that the mountain and its journey are both part of life's reality and a gateway to another reality or universe. The climb up the mountain is not merely a journey toward death but a return to nature, where the elderly re-enter

the ecological cycle from which all life originates. The mountain thus becomes a place of death and regeneration, where life is sustained through natural processes of decay and rebirth. Nature, as both a stage and a force in the film, exerts its power and influence, with the mountain towering above the village as a symbol of the inevitability of death. It is a place of loneliness and finitude, but it also represents a return to nature, where the elderly are reunited with the earth. Orin's ascent mirrors this return to the natural order.

This process of renewal is visible not only in the film's narrative but also in its cinematography. The visual aesthetics of the film heighten this emphasis. As Carta (2015) notes in his article *Observational Cinema*, "It is correct to say that observational films recreate the subjective experience of the eye and mind behind the camera through long scenes that reproduce the single point of view of an actual observer. The refusal of fictional editing in observational films is related to the use of long scenes" (Carta, 2015, p. 4). In this sense, the cinematography in *The Ballad of Narayama* serves as a tool for depicting human behavior and social interactions in the village with minimal directorial intervention.

The frequent depiction of changing seasons highlights the cyclical nature of life and death. Imamura uses visual transitions between seasons to reflect the aging process and the inevitability of death. In the village, time and life are understood as cyclical and repetitive rather than linear.

The seasons are a metaphor, reminding viewers that life continues after death, just as spring follows winter. As Orin prepares for his final journey, the cold and harsh winter reinforces that death is not a failure but a necessary renewal—part of the natural cycle that sustains life. This ecocritical perspective portrays death, like the seasons, as essential for maintaining ecological balance, a fact the villagers accept. The recurring images of the passing seasons, the mountains, and the planting and harvesting cycles are constant reminders of the interdependence between human life and the environment. These natural cycles shape the villagers' lives, and their understanding of life and death is fundamentally cyclical. In this way, *The Ballad of Narayama* sharply contrasts and critiques modern societies that often seek to prolong life at the expense of ecological balance. By framing death as an integral part of the natural world, the film invites viewers to reconsider the role of death in maintaining ecological harmony.

Another central theme of *The Ballad of Narayama* is the ethics of aging and social exclusion. The film highlights that in traditional societies, aging is often viewed not merely as a biological process but as a form of social death, wherein the elderly gradually lose their social roles and become marginalized within the community. This marginalization, exemplified by the practice of *ubasute*, raises profound ethical questions about the value of individual lives in a society where survival depends on the efficient use of limited resources.

In this context, the film portrays aging as a form of social exclusion, where the elderly are seen as a burden on society's fragile ecological and economic systems once their productive capacity diminishes. This exclusion is symbolized by the practice of *ubasute*, where elders like Orin willingly accept their fate and retreat to the mountains to die, allowing the younger generation to continue benefiting from the village's limited resources. In contrast to the modern, individualistic perspective emphasizing longevity, the film compels viewers to grapple with the ethical tensions between the community's needs and the social value of its aging members.

One of the central ethical dilemmas in the film is the marginalization of the elderly and the expectation that they voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the community's greater interest. While the villagers accept *ubasute* as a necessary practice, the film invites the audience to question the morality of this tradition: Is it justifiable to ostracize the elderly when they are no longer considered beneficial? Although the marginalization of the elderly is portrayed as a necessary sacrifice for the collective interest, the film raises difficult ethical questions: When does the value of a human life end? How should a community balance the care of its weakest members with the need to ensure survival? In *The Ballad of Narayama*, the answer lies in a culturally ingrained belief that personal sacrifice is essential for communal survival. Orin's acceptance of her fate is portrayed not as a tragedy but as an honorable duty that reaffirms her place within the community, even as she departs from it.

While this duty is treated with great respect and honor, it also forms the core of the film's ethical debate between survival and compassion. *Ubasute* may ensure the community's survival by removing an economic burden. However, it comes at an emotional and moral cost: Orin's son, Tatsuhei, who deeply loves and respects his mother, is emotionally burdened by the responsibility of taking her to the mountain. This journey is portrayed with profound personal pain that accompanies the social obligation. At one point during the journey, Tatsuhei feels overwhelmed by sadness and briefly contemplates abandoning his task. When he rests and loses sight of her, he briefly feels a sense of relief, thinking she might have continued without him. This emotional process is one that Tatsuhei, as an individual, struggles to cope with. By unitedly individual suffering with the community's survival, the film forces the viewer to consider the emotional implications of a survival ethic in which compassion and mercy are often sacrificed in the face of ecological and social realities.

The concept of aging as a form of social death sharply contrasts with modern views of aging, prioritizing individual autonomy and longevity. In contemporary societies, the elderly are often provided with long-term health care and social support, fostering the belief in life extension, regardless of the economic or ecological costs. By contrast, *The Ballad of Narayama* presents aging as a collective process, much like in many traditional societies, where individuals must face

their diminishing role in the community's survival. The ethical framework presented in the film challenges modern approaches to elder care and personal dignity by prioritizing the collective's needs over the individual's desires.

The film also explores the tension between the community's needs and the value of individuals in traditional society. The villagers in *The Ballad of Narayama* share a common understanding that their survival depends on carefully managing resources, including human resources. Once the elderly can no longer contribute to the community's labor, they are considered expendable in a system prioritizing productivity and sustainability. However, this does not mean that the elderly are treated disrespectfully; on the contrary, their departure is portrayed as a sacred duty ensuring the village's continuity. From an ecocritical perspective, the film frames aging regarding social death and its ethical dilemmas, offering a critical reflection on how traditional societies have evolved in their approaches to ethics, aging, and communal survival. In this sense, the film invites viewers to reconsider the tension between social responsibility and personal sacrifice, particularly within the ethics of old age. While modern societies value longevity greatly, the film raises the question of whether the resources expended to achieve this longevity violate ethical boundaries. Although few modern societies would adopt practices like *ubasute* today, the tension between caring for an aging population and managing limited resources remains a pressing ethical issue.

Conclusion

The Ballad of Narayama is a philosophical and thought-provoking cinematic exploration of death, aging, and ecology. Through the traditional Japanese practice of *ubasute*, the film delves into the ethical, social, and ecological dimensions of mortality, providing a framework for viewers to consider how traditional societies confront the inevitability of death. The film serves not only as a reflection of cultural practices surrounding aging and resource management but also raises universal questions about the value of life, the role of elders in society, and the delicate balance between survival and compassion.

One of the film's key insights is its portrayal of death as a natural and necessary process within a society's survival strategy. In contrast to modern conceptions of death, which often emphasize life extension at all costs, *The Ballad of Narayama* presents death as an integral part of the life-sustaining ecological cycle. When the elderly can no longer contribute productively to society, they are expected to make the ultimate sacrifice to allow younger generations to flourish. This pragmatic approach to death, shaped by the harsh realities of resource scarcity, emphasizes the interconnectedness of human life and the environment—a theme reinforced by the film's use of nature as a symbol of life and death. The mountain, the seasons, and the natural cycles depicted

in the film remind us that death, like the changing seasons, is essential to maintaining balance in the natural world.

The film also raises important ethical questions about the moral complexities surrounding the treatment of the elderly and societal survival—an increasingly relevant topic in today's debates. The practice of *ubasute* forces viewers to confront the exclusion of the elderly, highlighting the tension between society's need for survival and the inherent value of individuals. While Orin's acceptance of her fate is portrayed as honorable and necessary, the film emphasizes this tradition's emotional and moral costs. By examining the social exclusion of the elderly as both a cultural and ecological response, the film opens a critical debate on how modern societies should approach aging populations, especially as they face increasing pressures related to resource management and healthcare costs.

Regarding its ecocritical significance, *The Ballad of Narayama* is an essential example of how traditional societies harmonize their everyday practices with the natural world. In the film, death is not treated as a personal tragedy but as a necessary ecological sacrifice that ensures the continuation of life for the collective. This approach invites viewers to reconsider ethical debates about aging and dying in a world where the desire for longevity is at odds with the reality that it means depleting finite resources. The film's depiction of death as a social and ecological imperative

opens an essential space for a reassessment of contemporary values, especially in the context of growing environmental concerns and the impending impact of climate change. The tension between individual autonomy and social responsibility is central to this discourse and offers a powerful reflection on the moral implications of human interaction with the environment.

In conclusion, *The Ballad of Narayama* raises profound questions about how we measure the value of life in modern society. In the film, the elderly are seen as valuable only to the extent that they can contribute to the community's survival. This position contrasts modern Western ideals, prioritizing individual autonomy and personal fulfillment. The film challenges viewers to critically examine the economic and ecological costs of valuing life solely in terms of its duration rather than its contribution to the collective. It offers significant implications for how we view life's worth.

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