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Deconstructing Japanese Romance Films through the Lens of Wabi-sabi, Mono no aware, Yūgen, and Kawaii (1990-2010)

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Abstract

This study takes a close look at Japanese romance films made between 1990 and 2010, examining them through both traditional and modern Japanese aesthetic ideas such as Wabi-sabi, Mono no aware, Yūgen, and Kawaii. By connecting this age-old aesthetics with today's pop culture, the research reveals how these varied principles create a distinctive cinematic language. By analysing films like *Love Letter* and *Sky of Love*, this study highlights the dynamic interaction between ancient philosophies and modern storytelling methods, showing how Japanese aesthetics have deepened and evolved in today's cinema. The study offers fresh insights into the cultural and artistic importance of Japanese romance films, providing a deeper understanding of their emotional impact and lasting charm.

Keywords: Japanese romance film; Japanese aesthetics; Wabi-sabi; Mono no aware; Yūgen; Kawaii

Deconstructing Japanese Romance Films through the Lens of Wabi-sabi, Mono no aware, Yūgen, and Kawaii (1990-2010)

Fengmuhan Li

Introduction

Contemporary Japanese romance films from the 1990s to the 2010s mark an important era in Japanese cinema. These films stand out for their unique storytelling and visual styles, which have become quite popular across East and Southeast Asia. This study takes a closer look at how traditional Japanese aesthetics have left their mark on these movies, focusing on four main ideas: Wabi-sabi, Mono no aware, Yūgen, and Kawaii.

Back in 1990, Japan's economy faced a major downturn. The Bank of Japan suddenly raised interest rates and imposed strict monetary policies, putting an end to the easy credit that had fuelled speculative real estate and stock investments (Iwamoto, 2006, p.1). During this challenging economic period, these romance films provided a source of emotional connection for people dealing with societal changes. Their appeal didn't stop at Japan's borders; they also became widely popular in East and Southeast Asian countries, especially in regions with shared Confucian cultural values, where their themes and aesthetics resonated deeply with audiences. Often adapted from sources like novels, manga, and even phone novels, these films blend traditional aesthetics with modern pop culture.

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This study explores how Japanese aesthetic concepts shape both the stories and technical elements of contemporary romance films. By looking at movies like *Love Letter* (1995) and *Sky of Love* (2007), the research shows how directors combine traditional aesthetics with modern filmmaking techniques to create deep emotional impact. The principles of Wabi-sabi, Mono no aware, Yūgen, and Kawaii are examined to reveal how these timeless ideas continue to influence the distinctive visual and emotional language of Japanese romance films, even as society and culture evolve.

The article is organized as follows: it begins with a review of literature that delves into the four aesthetic concepts and their cultural and philosophical roots. This is followed by an analysis of how these aesthetics influence both the storytelling and technical aspects of the films. The article wraps up with thoughts on the cultural and emotional significance of these films in Japanese cinema, emphasizing their lasting appeal and artistic contribution.

Literature Review

According to Keene (1969), Japanese aesthetics, deeply rooted in the country's rich cultural and religious heritage, have played a pivotal role in shaping its artistic expressions, including contemporary romance films (p. 293). The complex interplay of various religious influences, primarily Buddhism, Taoism, and Western Christianity, has fostered a unique aesthetic sensibility that permeates Japanese art and cinema. Among these, Buddhism has been

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particularly significant in the Japanese national character and its aesthetic preferences. The Buddhist emphasis on impermanence, nature, imagination, and simplicity has profoundly influenced Japanese artistic sensibilities, encouraging a focus on the ephemeral beauty of life and the depth of emotions that can be evoked through subtle expressions (Keene, 1969, p. 302, p. 305). This aesthetic foundation, further enriched by Taoist philosophies and later influenced by Western Christian concepts, has evolved into a distinctively Japanese approach to beauty and artistic expression. The resulting aesthetic principles, including wabi-sabi, mono no aware, yūgen, and kawaii, reflect this complex cultural synthesis and continue to shape contemporary Japanese cinema, particularly in the genre of romance films. These aesthetic concepts not only guide the narrative and technical aspects of filmmaking but also resonate deeply with audiences, offering a unique lens through which to view love, life, and the human experience.

Wabi-sabi (侘び寂び): Wabi-sabi is a Japanese term but difficult to define in English words. Generally, it refers to qualities like impermanence, humility, asymmetry, and imperfection (Juniper, 2003, p. 2). Of these, the beauty of imperfection is most commonly expressed in Japanese art. This concept finds its philosophical roots in Taoism, where the natural world is seen as inherently imperfect and ever-changing, much like a river that cannot remain still (Juniper, 2003, p. 7). The idea that nothing is permanent, nor perfect, closely aligns with the aesthetics of Wabi-sabi, which embraces these principles as part of its core. This

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concept is also deeply reflected in Buddhism, where the impermanence of all things is a central tenet (Railey, 1997, p. 126).

Appreciating imperfection itself is a quintessential experience of Japanese aesthetics. For example, the reverence for death—where death is seen as eternal—is a theme often employed in Japanese works of art. In many Japanese romance films from the 1990s to 2010s, the story often ends with the death of a character, highlighting this aesthetic. The symbolic nature of Sakura (cherry blossoms) illustrates this concept; their most beautiful moment is at the end of their life when they fall gracefully to the ground. As Keene (1969) suggests, 'Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration' (p.299). In the same way, though death may seem like a fading in these films, it represents the pinnacle of beauty and love, forever preserved in memory through its fleeting nature.

Mono no aware (物の哀れ): Regarding De Bary (1995), the Japanese word "aware" originally referred to the sense of "ah-ness" or deep appreciation for things, but over time, it evolved to describe something "pleasant" or "interesting." An inscription from 763 uses "aware" to express the writer's emotions upon witnessing spring rain. Gradually and eventually, this word took on a note of sadness as well (p. 44). While Mono no aware can be translated into English as "the sadness of things," this translation only captures part of its essence. In Japanese

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aesthetics, Mono no aware is more accurately understood as "sensitivity to things," referring to the emotional resonance one feels in response to the world around them (De Bary, 1995, p. 44). This concept emphasizes the interconnectedness of human beings and nature, where natural elements evoke deep emotional responses. As reflected in the saying “Human is an integral part of nature,” the ideas of “symbiosis” and “empathy” are deeply embraced and pursued in Japanese culture. These ideas align with Buddhist teachings on impermanence (無常, mujō), which emphasize the fleeting nature of life and the inevitability of change (Railey, 1997, p. 126). In Buddhism, the awareness of impermanence deepens one’s emotional sensitivity to both the beauty and the sorrow inherent in all things.

In Japanese films, this aesthetic often manifests through objects or natural elements that act as emotional vessels. These elements transcend their literal meaning, evoking personal emotions and memories, such as the fleeting beauty of life or the sorrow of parting. By focusing on the emotional resonance rather than overt action, these films capture the transient, delicate beauty that defines Mono no aware.

Thus, Mono no aware represents a spontaneous emotional drive, a profound awakening of sentiment. In the process of human interaction with nature, through the establishment of sensitivity to things, one develops a deep perception of them, encompassing a spectrum of

emotions—be it sorrow, joy, or a sense of wistfulness.

Yūgen (幽玄): Yūgen is a Japanese aesthetic concept that emphasizes subtlety, mystery, and depth, often conveying what cannot be fully explained or directly perceived. Unlike symbolism in Western traditions, where a specific object or action directly represents an idea, Yūgen is more about the suggestion of something beyond what is visible (De Bary, 1995, p. 51). This notion of suggesting something beyond the tangible resonates with Western notions of the aesthetic experience. For example, Edgar Allan Poe (1985), in his reflections on beauty and poetry, emphasized the power of vagueness and the spiritual effects it can evoke, suggesting that beauty often lies in what is indefinite and elusive, much like the essence of Yūgen.

In Japanese aesthetics, Yūgen creates a sense of wonder and leaves room for contemplation. It emphasizes the importance of the unknown or the hidden, allowing the audience to engage with the material on a deeper level (Tsubaki, 1971, p. 56). This resonates with the language and culture of Japan, where subtlety and nuance are highly valued, and meaning often unfolds gradually rather than being presented outright.

The formation of Yūgen is influenced by Zen Buddhism, but unlike Mono no aware, which emphasizes emotional sensitivity to impermanence and the natural world, Yūgen focuses on the intangible and mysterious aspects of existence. Zen teachings stress the limitations of

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human understanding and the value of what remains unseen or unspoken. In Yūgen, beauty is found not in the physical form or visible world, but in the subtle, fleeting moments that suggest a deeper spiritual truth (Tsubaki, 1971, p. 57). This aligns with the Zen concept of mu (emptiness), where the true essence of things lies beyond material appearances.

In Japanese films, Yūgen is masterfully expressed through a combination of quiet, contemplative atmospheres, the artful use of shadows, soft lighting and long takes. This aesthetic approach creates a canvas of empty spaces and poignant silences, evoking emotions that are not explicitly shown on screen.

Kawaii (可愛い): Often translated as "cuteness" or "loveliness," Kawaii is a key aesthetic in modern Japanese popular culture. It is primarily recognized through its design, which often features soft, rounded shapes that evoke a sense of warmth and a desire to nurture. Beyond these visual elements, Kawaii also embodies deeper qualities such as innocence, playfulness, and charm. This aesthetic has woven itself into various aspects of contemporary Japanese culture, influencing sectors like fashion, consumer goods, media, and entertainment (Pellitteri, 2018, p. 6).

In recent Japanese romance films, Kawaii aesthetics are pervasive, appearing in everything from the actresses' costumes and hairstyles to the cute accessories, such as Hello

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Kitty dolls and phone straps. These visual elements are central to the appeal of the films, where actresses are often chosen for their kawaii appearance, which helps attract audiences and enhance the emotional tone of the stories. Additionally, kawaii aesthetics evoke emotional responses through soft, cute, and delicate visual presentations, fostering a deeper emotional connection with objects. The concept of "Kawaii" goes beyond just being a visual style; it embodies a sense of youthful innocence and an ideal of purity. Characters that fit this aesthetic are often portrayed as shy, kind, and emotionally open, tapping into the audience's longing for nostalgia and emotional bonds. This aesthetic focuses on simplicity and a carefree spirit, offering a lighthearted counterbalance to the more serious and often sombre themes found in other parts of Japanese cinema. Kawaii is more than just a visual style—it represents youthful innocence and idealized purity. Characters portrayed within this aesthetic are typically shy, kind, and emotionally vulnerable, aligning with the audience's desire for nostalgia and emotional connection. This aesthetic also emphasizes simplicity and light-heartedness, providing a contrast to the deeper, more melancholic themes often present in other aspects of Japanese cinema.

The idea of "Wabi-sabi" embraces imperfection, influencing both the development of plots and thematic expressions by finding beauty in life's imperfections. Meanwhile, "Mono no

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aware" has grown from its original association with the fleeting nature of things to represent a deep sensitivity to the world, capturing the subtle nuances of nature and human emotions. "Yūgen" adds an element of mystery and profundity to stories, creating atmospheres that linger and go beyond what is immediately visible. With its focus on cuteness, "Kawaii" creates distinct visual styles and heartwarming tales of youth. These aesthetic principles don't just guide the making of Japanese romance films; they also have a strong impact on how audiences emotionally connect with the stories. This analysis will explore how these concepts shape the narrative structures and technical aspects of this unique film genre, highlighting their crucial role in creating experiences that deeply resonate with viewers.

Analysis

Wabi-sabi

Wabi-sabi, a key element in Japanese aesthetics, highlights the allure in things that are impermanence and imperfection. This concept, which draws from Taoist and Buddhist philosophies, often finds expression in the fleeting nature of life and love depicted in Japanese romance films. By embracing flawed and transient moments, wabi-sabi becomes a compelling way to illustrate the delicate nature of love.

Take the film *I Give My First Love to You* (2009) as an example. It tells the poignant love story of Takuma, a young boy with a congenital heart disease, and Mayu, the daughter of his

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doctor. They fall deeply in love from a young age, fully aware that Takuma's life is expected to end before he turns twenty. In one particularly moving scene, the two discover a four-leaf clover and make a wish for Takuma's recovery, even though they understand it's a hopeless desire. Their love is marked by the certainty of loss, yet they hold onto it with intense devotion and passion. When Takuma ultimately passes away, Mayu, dressed in a white wedding gown, marries his ashes, declaring: "Living is such a heartbreaking experience. But even if I knew I would be this sad, I wouldn't regret it. I would still fall in love with you, Takuma." This moment encapsulates the wabi-sabi philosophy — that in embracing imperfection and the inevitability of death, love attains its most beautiful, eternal form. Their love, though doomed, remains perfect in its imperfection, forever preserved in Mayu's heart.

Heavenly Forest (2006) presents another tale of love tinged with the sorrow of impermanence. The heroine, Shizuru, suffers from a genetic disorder that prevents her from growing or fully experiencing love without risking her life. Despite this, she decides to follow her heart and falls in love with Makoto, even though she knows this choice will lead to her eventual death. Shizuru mirrors things Makoto loves, from people to hobbies, capturing their shared moments through photography, while holding onto a love she knows cannot last. As her love deepens, she prepares for a photography competition, asking Makoto to kiss her in their

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special “heavenly forest,” capturing the moment in a photograph. After the kiss, Makoto realizes that he has fallen in love with Shizuru, but before he can act on his feelings, she leaves. Two years later, Makoto learns of her passing through an invitation to her photography exhibition in New York. There, he discovers countless photos of himself, along with a striking image of Shizuru, now grown. Unlike *I Give My First Love to You*, which is filled with a sense of hopelessness, Heavenly Forest retains a youthful and fresh tone, despite Shizuru’s death. The film beautifully conveys the wabi-sabi idea that death, while inevitable, is not entirely frightening; it is, instead, the blossoming of poignant beauty. Shizuru’s love, though short-lived, continues to live on in Makoto’s memories, preserved in the hope he holds for their meeting in another life.

Love Letter (1995) is another film that exemplifies Wabi-sabi through its exploration of love, loss, and the incomplete nature of human relationships. The film follows Hiroko, who, two years after the death of her fiancé, Itsuki Fujii, discovers an old address of his high school in his belongings and sends a letter to it, despite knowing he has passed away. Hiroko is in for a shock when she hears back from a woman who shares the same name, Itsuki Fujii, who happened to be a high school classmate of her late fiancé. As they start exchanging letters, Hiroko begins to piece together her fiancé's hidden emotions, discovering that he had harbored a quiet love for this other Itsuki throughout his life.

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The narrative of *Love Letter* beautifully captures the essence of wabi-sabi, not just through the lens of death but through the lingering presence of feelings left unsaid and chances not taken. Hiroko's mourning becomes even more complex as she slowly comes to terms with the idea that she might not have been her fiancé's only love. The unresolved emotions between the two Itsukis, Hiroko's regret over not truly knowing her fiancé, and even the silent loyalty of Akiba, who has always been there for her, all highlight the imperfection and incompleteness. Each character carries their own imperfections, yet undeniably, they all manage to grasp fragments of their love. What seems like loss ultimately becomes a form of gain. The cracks still hold their beautiful shape, and sudden pause in breath is the caress of love reaching the heart.

By embracing the fleeting nature of life and love, these films encourage the audience to find appreciation in the delicate interplay of happiness and sadness, reminding us that true beauty often emerges from what is incomplete and fleeting.

Mono no aware

Mono no aware, deeply rooted in Japanese aesthetics, captures a profound sensitivity to the fleeting nature of life. It highlights the emotional connections between people and their environment, where natural elements often hold deep human emotions. This idea is vividly

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depicted in modern Japanese romance films, both in their narrative and in the techniques used in filmmaking.

Sky of Love (2007) illustrates the Mono no aware aesthetic in its narrative structure, particularly by using the sky as a metaphor for love and memory. The film follows the relationship between Mika and Hiroki, with Hiroki's terminal illness serving as a constant reminder of life's impermanence. Before he dies, Hiroki makes a touching promise to Mika, saying he will become the sky after his death, thus always watching over and being with her. This promise turns the sky into a powerful symbol of their enduring love, going beyond the physical limitations of Hiroki's life. The sky becomes both a visual and emotional focal point for the story, representing their love that continues beyond physical existence.

A key scene unfolds after Hiroki's death: Mika, holding the notebook he left behind, walks to an empty bridge, contemplating ending her life. As she stands there, two white doves fly past her and soar towards the sky, seemingly stopping her from going through with it. The notebook slips from her grasp and falls to the ground. A gentle breeze turns its pages, as if reading Hiroki's words of love for Mika aloud. Tears roll down her face, but she manages a smile as she looks up at the sky and calls out his name. This moment encapsulates the essence of Mono no aware, as Mika finds solace and beauty in the memory of their love, despite its physical impermanence.

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Figure 1: Sky of Love (2007): Mika gazing up at the sky with tears and smile

The vastness of the sky, acting as a vessel for their love to be eternal, contrasts with the short-lived nature of human life. This visual metaphor is further emphasized through the use of empty shots showing the sky and soft lighting, techniques that draw the audience into Mika's emotional world and the endlessness of the sky she looks upon. The empty shots of "sky" reinforce Hiroki's connection to the heavens and symbolize the tangible form of their love, allowing viewers to fully experience the emotional weight of Hiroki's promise. Meanwhile, the soft, diffused lighting envelops the scene in a gentle sorrow and wistfulness, contributing to the emotional depth and reflective quality central to Mono no aware.

Heavenly Forest (2006) masterfully employs long takes to deepen the sense of Mono no aware by allowing emotions to unfold gradually and organically, particularly in a scene where the two main characters, Makoto and Shizuru, share a kiss. A long take, described as 'a relatively

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long, uninterrupted shot, typically lasting over a minute' (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2011, p. 454), has long been part of traditional Japanese cinematic aesthetics. Directors like Ozu Yasujiro made frequent use of this technique, and it continues to be prevalent in contemporary Japanese romance films. This method creates an atmosphere of 'quietness and sorrow' or 'profound warmth,' allowing the audience to slowly become absorbed in the film's emotional landscape (Schilling, 1999, p. 248).

Figure 2: Heavenly Forest (2006): The long take of the kissing moment between Shizuru and Makoto.

In this particular long take, lasting over a minute, the camera lingers on the nervous anticipation before the kiss, with minimal dialogue and movement, allowing the characters' internal emotions to take centre stage. This long take's continuity lets viewers fully experience

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the depth of emotion, as if this moment could last forever. Yet, as the story progresses, the audience becomes aware that this perfect moment is fleeting—what feels like eternal happiness is merely an illusion, destined to fade as the narrative unfolds. At this point, the audience is not yet aware of the female protagonist's genetic illness that will cause her to die after reaching sexual maturity, but the film has already subtly revealed her growing love for the male protagonist and her increasing physical frailty. As a result, viewers feel a sense of subtle melancholy amidst the beauty of this long take. Nature serves as a poignant backdrop to their love—both beautiful and fragile. The tranquil and dreamlike landscape connects humans and nature, reflecting the concept of impermanence, as both nature and the love shared by the characters exist in a delicate and transitory state. Just as nature undergoes the changing of seasons, their momentary bliss is fleeting, bound to fade with time. This moment captures the essence of fleeting beauty, embodying an awareness of life's impermanence.

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Figure 3-4: Love Letter (1995): Hiroko in the snowy mountains

In *Love Letter (1995),* the scene where Hiroko calls out in front of the snow-covered mountain perfectly embodies the aesthetic concept of Mono no aware, deeply capturing the complexity of human emotions and the fleeting nature of life. In this pivotal moment, the snow-covered mountain, where Hiroko's fiancé Itsuki passed away, becomes a vessel for her emotions. It holds her grief over his death, as well as her inner turmoil about whether she was truly loved by him or merely a substitute. At the same time, the mountain also symbolizes Itsuki himself, bridging the tangible and intangible aspects of her emotions through the natural landscape. Hiroko stands at the foot of the mountain, calling out repeatedly, "Are you doing well? I'm doing fine." This action not only captures her changing emotions but also acts as a cathartic ritual of goodbye. She moves from feeling lost and sad to accepting the unchangeable nature of things: Itsuki's passing, the permanence of his first love, and the questions that will

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never be answered.

Visually, the mountain the mountain seems timeless compared to human life. The use of 360-degree filming highlights the contrast between Hiroko's lonely presence and the vastness of the mountains. Wide shots show her delicate silhouette against the backdrop, while close-ups reveal her emotional outbursts, allowing viewers to feel her emotional journey from a broad to a detailed perspective. The stark difference between the mountain's pure white and Hiroko's red coat represents the dual nature of purity and complexity, permanence and fleetingness. These various filming techniques not only highlight the majesty of the surroundings but also suggest the intricacies of Hiroko's inner experiences, creating a contrast in space and emotional depth that enhances audience empathy to deepen the artistic expression of Mono no aware.

In addition, this film also defines, through the alone back view of Hiroko, emotional distances between herself, Akiba, and male Itsuki. Between Akiba and Hiroko, there is an emotional distance of loving and being loved; while between Itsuki and Hiroko, there exists a distance of life and death, true love and substitute. This expression of emotional distance further enhances Hiroko's understanding of impermanence.

Director Shunji Iwai successfully captures the profound and delicate sorrow in 'Mono no aware' through his exquisite technical skills. He materializes abstract emotions, allowing

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viewers to deeply experience the complex changes in Hiroko's inner world, evoking profound emotional resonance in the audience.

These films use natural elements and contemplative moments to evoke a profound awareness of life's transience, drawing the audience into an intimate experience of both love and loss. The use of empty shots, long takes, soft lighting, and wide shots contributes to an emotional atmosphere that invites reflection, allowing the fleeting beauty of human existence to unfold in front of the viewer. Mono no aware captures not just the beauty of impermanence, but also the emotional richness that comes from accepting and appreciating the ephemeral moments that define human existence.

Yūgen

In Japanese aesthetics, Yūgen conveys a sense of subtlety and mystery, where beauty lies in what is suggested rather than fully revealed. It invites contemplation of the unknown and the hidden, evoking a quiet depth that cannot be easily explained. This concept is powerfully depicted in Japanese romance films, where narrative ambiguity and quiet atmospheres create space for reflection.

Unlike Hollywood films, which use a cause-and-effect structure to engage the audience and minimize distractions (Pramaggiore & Wallis, 2011, p. 344-345), Japanese films like Shunji Iwai's *Love Letter (1995)* take a different approach, embracing a more open and reflective

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narrative style. The film's dual storyline—the letters exchanged between Hiroko and female Itsuki, and the flashbacks to female Itsuki's memories of her high school crush, male Itsuki—creates a layered narrative that leaves much unsaid, allowing the audience to piece together the story through subtle clues. This non-linear narrative structure embodies the Yūgen aesthetic, as the film deliberately avoids providing clear answers, instead inviting viewers to contemplate the deeper connections between the characters and their pasts.

Figure 5: Love Letter (1995): Male Itsuki is reading a book beside a window and partly hidden behind the curtain.

Visually, Yūgen is often expressed in the film with shadows, soft lighting, and long takes (Tsubaki, 1971). One lyrical scene presents male Itsuki reading by a window, half-concealed by a gently swaying curtain. The dance of light and shadow—where the sun pours through the window to softly illuminate half of his face—puts him in a mysterious and introspective mood. The lack of dialogue in this scene heightens the sense of Yūgen, allowing audience to focus on

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the quiet and reflective atmosphere. Instead of merely getting the visual information that Itsuki is reading, viewers are invited to imagine the unspoken emotions and meanings that exist beyond the frame. The subtlety of this moment, combined with the slow pace of the scene, allows for an emotional depth that transcends the immediate narrative.

The use of long takes and minimal dialogue, which is signature style of Japanese romance films from the 1990s to the 2010s, works in many different purposes. These techniques create a quiet stillness that reflects the essence of Mono no aware, drawing out the emotional resonance between characters and their surroundings. They also add a sense of mystery, as seen in Yūgen, pulling viewers into deeper reflection and contemplation. By slowing down the pace of the film and allowing moments to linger, directors like Shunji Iwai craft a space for the audience to engage with the emotional subtext of the scene. In *Love Letter,* the slow and deliberate pacing gives the audience time to reflect on the characters' inner lives, the passage of time, and the lingering impact of unspoken feelings. This approach is quite different from Western films, where dialogue and action usually push the story forward. In Yūgen, however, meaning is derived from what is left unsaid, allowing a more introspective and thoughtful viewing experience.

The acting in *Love Letter* exemplifies Yūgen often conveyed through subtle facial

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expressions and body language, instead of big emotional displays. In a key scene, Hiroko receives a letter from female Itsuki, and rather than reacting with an outburst, she sits in quiet reflection. The restraining performance is hinted not exhibited, leaving the audience the sense of mystery and depth that lingers beyond the scene. Similarly, in *Tears for You (2006)*, Kaoru returns to Okinawa to meet her nominal brother, Totaro. Although Kaoru loves Totaro, she never expresses her feelings. When Totaro introduces his girlfriend to her, Kaoru remains composed with only quiet sadness in the eyes betraying her expression. This kind of acting lets the audience intuitively pick up on the hidden emotions beneath the surface, which is what Yūgen is all about.

In addition, the ambiguity and connotation of Yūgen, much like the unspoken emotions of a secret crush in youth, are also functioned as the significant narrative tone in Japanese romance films. For example, Shunji Iwai's *April Story (1998)* presents a simple narrative of a university girl who harbours a secret crush on a boy from her hometown. While her emotions are held in and not discharged, she spends her time quietly observing him from a distance. This is the most subtle portrayal of wordless longing; essential Yūgen—the depth of emotion here is merely suggested, not stated.

These films embody the essence of Yūgen aesthetics through their unique narrative

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approaches, visual styles, and performance techniques. They create a profound and mysterious scenario that beckons the viewer to step inside and experience the unspoken and hidden meanings beyond the narrative.

Kawaii

In Japanese romance films from the 1990s to the 2010s, the essence of Kawaii are vividly captured in the school-based settings. Kawaii, with its focus on innocence and cuteness, fits perfectly with the themes of young love that are central to these films. Take films like *Sky of Love (2007), Love Letter (1995),* and *I Give My First Love to You (2009)* for instance. They often feature student characters whose stories develop in school, emphasizing the purity and challenges of growing up. In Sky of Love, we follow Mika and Hiroki as their relationship evolves from high school to university, even as the movie delves into serious topics like Mika's pregnancy, abortion, and school violence. Despite these mature themes, the spontaneous and youthful emotions shown in the film align with Kawaii's focus on purity and tenderness.

Love Letter, with its dual narrative, explores the budding romance between two high school students, both named Itsuki. This story is a perfect example of youthful and pure affection, capturing Kawaii's charm where simplicity and beauty come together. Similarly, *I Give My First Love to You* starts in a school setting, following Mayu and Takuma's relationship from childhood through their school years. Even with the looming threat of Takuma's serious

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health condition, the love that blossoms from their childhood into adolescence embodies the pure and delicate qualities that are at the heart of Kawaii.

Kawaii is not just about visual elements like cute outfits and hairstyles; it's also about the emotional purity in the stories these films tell. They strike a chord with younger audiences and bring a sense of nostalgia to adults, offering a break from the stresses of everyday life and a chance to revisit the innocence of youth. As director Shunji Iwai pointed out, Japanese teenagers might not fully relate to the themes of traditional Japanese films, but the youth culture—and Kawaii along with it—grabs their attention, making these movies both emotionally touching and visually pleasing (Schilling, 1999, p. 71).

Conclusion

This study has illustrated the profound influence of traditional Japanese aesthetic concepts on romance films from the 1990s to 2010s, visually putting together an ancient philosophy with storytelling technique. The exploration of wabi-sabi, mono no aware, yūgen, and kawaii demonstrates how these principles shape not only the narrative structure but also the visual language of these films, creating a uniquely Japanese cinematic experience.

Regarding Wabi-sabi, the embrace of imperfection and transience finds expression in narratives that film the beauty of fleeting moments and imperfect love by the use of soft lighting

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and lingering camera work. Then, Mono no aware deepens such sensibility, using natural surroundings as emotional anchors to evoke a profound awareness of life's ephemerality. Yūgen introduces mystery and depth through techniques such as shadow and minimal dialogue, inviting viewers to reflect on the unsaid and unseen. Meanwhile, Kawaii elements such as school-based settings inject a sense of innocence and purity into these often melancholic tale, providing a counterpoint to the deeper themes explored.

The enduring impact of these aesthetic principles on Japanese romance films extends beyond mere stylistic choices. As if they are a cultural bridge across the different Confucian cultural nations of East and Southeast Asia, making these films popular among them. The emphasis on subtle emotional expression, the acceptance of life's transience, and the appreciation of youthful purity share a close resonance with Confucian values of harmony, respect for natural order, and the importance of human relationships. Moreover, these films flourished during a period of economic downturn in Japan, providing audiences a form of emotional solace and nostalgia. The combination of timeless philosophical concepts and modern storytelling techniques has contributed to the popularity of significance of this unique pop genre.

To conclude, this study reveals that these aesthetic principles are not mere decoration but,

in reality, substantial to the emotional and philosophical resonance in Japanese romance films. They create a cinematic language through which universal human experiences regarding love, loss, and the passage of time are expressed but remain distinctly rooted in Japanese cultural sensibilities. These films therefore provide insight into the evolving nature of Japanese aesthetics in contemporary culture by showing how ancient concepts continue to shape modern artistic expression and emotional resonance across cultural boundaries.

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