

# Shunji Iwai's Cinematic Narrative

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## Abstract

Shunji Iwai, an “writer” among the new generation of Japanese film directors, exudes a strong personal style in terms of visual expression, narrative characteristics, and theme transmission. In his works, the audience are exposed to the concern for on youth, the yearning for a beautiful love, and the expectations and hopes in their hearts even after the pain. Over-exposed close-ups, warm tones, and life-like plot presentation are the visual labels of his films. This article will take *Love Letter* as an example to study his video narrative.

**Keywords:** Shunji Iwai, *Love Letter*, image narrative, picture color

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## 1. Narrative Style

The parallel montage technique makes the narrative clearer. For example, Hiroko kept writing letters to Itsuki Fujii to undo the knot and figure out the truth. In dealing with the communication scene between the two, the director turned to two sets of parallel relationship shots to illustrate the two people writing and reading the letters. Although the actions certainly do not occur simultaneously, the causal relationship between the actions is clearly explained. Secondly, the director visualized the text to create a beautiful and moving storyline. The creation of the novel *Love Letter* preceded the film, and using the film

medium allowed the text to be visualized. Finally, the same actor's interpretation of different characters also adds a lot of color to the narrative. In the film, Hiroko and Fujii are played by the same person. The two constantly intersect throughout the film, making the film's narrative style more intense and the theme of secret love more prominent and meaningful. It can be seen that through scene space, editing techniques, character creation, etc., they can play a different role in the film narrative, and can better display the theme, establish relationships, and achieve a unique visual style.

## 2. Colors



**Figure 1.** A screenshot of *Love Letter*

(1) White. White runs frequently in Shunji Iwai's movies and has become an essential color theme. It symbolizes purity, nobility, spotlessly clean, and detached from worldliness, and represents pure love and friendship. In the long shot at the beginning of *Love Letter*, Hiroko Watanabe is walking slowly on the white snow. The camera follows Hiroko from an overhead panoramic view to the distant view of Hiroko, until Hiroko disappears into the snow-covered villages and towns. The character becomes a small dot in the snowy world. The music starts with the long shot sequence, and the director uses lenses, colors and music to set off the poetic and sad emotional tone of the opening sequence. What follows is a white funeral and the search for the "Itsuki Fujii" in a world filled with snow. By searching for "Itsuki Fujii", the love story between Hiroko's beloved Itsuki Fujii and a "Itsuki Fujii" with the same name and surname in middle school was gradually revealed. And that "Itsuki Fujii" looks exactly like Hiroko. The outdoor scenes of the movie are filled with white snow, and white is a cool color. The white of the snow and the blue of the sky make the outdoor scenes of the movie even more gloomy and sad, highlighting the inner pain caused by Fujii's death to Hiroko. The opening sequence is the first plot sequence of the movie that the audience sees after sitting in the theater. It is like a person's first impression. From an audiovisual perspective, the opening paragraph establishes the central visual impression, audiovisual style, and film rhythm of the film. For example, if it is an action movie, the opening sequence will usually use a fight or gunfight scene to attract the audience. If it is a suspense film, the opening part will present a general suspense throughout the film, which is called a "quick opening." If it is a love movie like *Love Letter*, a "cold opening"

is generally used. The "cold" here does not refer to the cold color of the picture or the characters in the story being in a cold environment, but to making the audience feel emotionally "cold". The opening plays an important role in the movie. The creator needs to catch the audience's attention in the opening part, so that the audience can calm down and sit in the cinema to watch the two-hour or even longer movie. Therefore, the opening must meet the audience's expectations and ignite the audience's excitement. The long shot in the opening sequence of *Love Letter* is undoubtedly the most stylized shot in the entire film. In the white world of ice and snow, the characters slowly melt into the white country town as the camera pans forward and rises. The characters in the world of ice and snow are the visual impression of the town is established at once. In the climax of the movie (100 minutes to 104 minutes), the director returns Hiroko Watanabe to the mountains where her boyfriend had an accident, looking for inner comfort and the beginning of a new life, and the female "Itsuki Fujii" escapes from the clutches of death, but actually escapes from her father's lung disease. The plots of *The Shadow of Death* are juxtaposed and intertwined. The outdoor world of ice and snow and the indoor hospital bed were initially a cold blue-white color. It was not until the female "Itsuki Fujii" and Watanabe Hiroko shouted "I'm fine" that the sun appeared and there was warm light in the ward. The exterior scene where Hiroko Watanabe is located. A bright sunlight paints the mountains in the distance with a golden light. In the ward, it seems that the sunlight outside the window illuminates the breath of life in the room. Here, it can be said that the color echoes the theme, and the theme determines the color choice.



**Figure 2.** A screenshot of *Love Letter*



**Figure 3.** A screenshot of *Love Letter*

(2) Warm colors + overexposure. Shunji Iwai's films are representative of Japanese fresh-faced movies. In addition to conforming to the positioning of most "fresh-faced" movies, their film characteristics also have a typical personal style. *Love Letter* conveys a unique visual impression through color. When depicting realistic memories, the picture is bluish, with low saturation, and is dominated by cold tones; while when depicting the memories between male "Itsuki Fujii" and female "Itsuki Fujii", the picture is yellowish, with high saturation, mainly warm colors. The director uses warm colors to depict memories and cold colors to write reality, creating a sharp contrast that deepens the audience's impression of the memories. The most recognizable one is the use of warm colors and overexposure to create a dreamlike image atmosphere. For example, in the movie *Love Letter*, indoor scenes and memory spaces are illuminated with bright yellow light or warm fireplace light. From the 17th to the 22nd minute of the film, Akiba expresses his love to Hiroko in the workplace. The flames burning in the boiler gave the image a golden texture. When Akiba Shigeru and Hiroko embraced and kissed passionately, the flames that flickered on and off highlighted the facial contours of the characters, pushing the emotional heat of this dramatic scene to the next level. The most meaningful and warm scene in

the film takes place in the 65-minute part. The English test paper was sent out by mistake. The female "Fujii" wanted to get her own paper back, but she didn't want the male "Fujii" to take the opportunity to prolong their time alone by correcting the answers on the paper. The warm yellow light bulb flickers on and off, seeming to symbolize the vague and ambiguous feelings between the two. Warm light fills the image space, making the scene comfortable and warm. From a color perspective, warm light can make people feel safe, relaxed and happy. From the perspective of lighting, the film uses high light and backlight shooting. Backlighting is often used to shoot some special scenes to create a sense of visual and psychological panic or mystery. In *Love Letter*, the backlight uses a unique technique to uniformly increase the exposure, so that the character's face can be seen clearly, and at the same time, the character's outline melts into the slightly overexposed background. For example, at 55 minutes into the film, the female "Itsuki Fujii" is sorting out books, and bright but not dazzling strong light shines in from the window behind her, wrapping her softly; at 59 minutes and 26 seconds into the film, the two "Itsuki Fujii" face each other. During the conversation, the boy took the card and said to her: "Fujii Tornado." At this time, the window next to the two people revealed a huge white light, covering each other,

giving people a dreamy and wonderful feeling. All the places in the film that have windows, doors, etc. that allow light to pass through, all present a dreamlike light effect without exception. This is because the highlights are too abundant, so the characters are blurred and their outlines are looming, making them less realistic. The most impressive thing about *Love Letter* is the close-up at the end: the female “Fujii” received a book from her schoolmates, and at the end of the borrowing card, she discovered the male “Itsuki Fujii”’s drawing of her as a teenager. At this time, the use of close-ups and explanations is unforgettable and impressive. It can be seen that sceneries can imply and describe the film space, establish the emotional distance between the film and the audience and characters, and establish the overall visual style and directorial style.

### 3. Pictures

A long shot kicks off, using a rising mirror to show a beautiful picture. The foreground is white snow in the mountains, and the depth of the field is a patchwork of blue-black houses and trees. The camera slowly rises to expand the field of view, and finally stops in a distant scene. Similar distant views appear many times,

leaving the lens with a deeper impression. In the mind, it is a “visual stay”. The rhythm of the entire shot is gentle and comfortable. From near to far, from walking to running, the proportion of the characters in the entire picture gradually decreases. The appropriate blank space makes it fall into a strange and lonely beauty, and the vision follows the movement of the characters. And transfer, the state of mind also returns to tranquility unconsciously. Almost all of *Love Letter* is shot by handheld photography. On the one hand, because the characters in this movie mostly appear in close-ups and close-ups, the slightly shaky camera gives the audience a sense of reality and immersion. On the other hand, it echos the character’s emotions, such as reflecting Hiroko’s early uneasiness and anxiety. The photography throughout the film also reveals the stumbling and restless youthful throbbing and green love of youth. When the female “Itsuki Fujii” in the hospital had hallucinations, she ran towards the place where her father was pushed away. The camera was shot at a large tilt angle from left to right, which also reflected the panic and uneasiness of the character at this time. Including hinting that this is an illusion.

### 4. Screen Editing



**Figure 4.** The picture is from a screenshot of *Love Letter*

The clever combination of shots and editing uses the same set of actions of the same character in different spaces (sneezing/opening the door) to complete the transition in time and space, which is quite dramatic and coincidental. First, the actions in the upper and lower spaces are all sneezing, and one ending is spraying the powder all over the face, and the other ending is the thing falling on the floor, both of which messed up things, and the transitions became smoother and more natural. The sad tone is tempered with a touch of playfulness. The second is that the female “Itsuki Fujii” had a hallucination in the hospital. When she opened the door, the transition of the same character in different times and different spaces with the same action reappeared, that is, the grown-up

tree opened the door and the childhood tree opened the door; The nurse called “Miss Fujii”, and the screen switched to the classroom roll call scene. Two Fujii raised their hands at the same time in class and said “yes”, and then the camera cut back to the adult female “Fujii” saying “yes”. They have also paid great attention to the scene and color of the shots. Different scenes in the same situation basically maintain the same main color. For example, the brown and red of the hospital door versus the brown and red of the door when I was a child, the green of the hospital corridor versus the green of the blackboard in the classroom, it can be said that it is a perfect match. This set of shots is quick, concise, clean and smooth, and the narrative flashes by, allowing us to naturally add

the heroine's memories of her youth from her dream about her father, setting the stage for a large number of stories about men that will unfold after reading Hiroko's letter. "Itsuki Fujii" memories serve as foreshadowing. There is also the use of lens assembly and editing to create the illusion of interweaving time and space. For example, the camera pans to capture a shot of Hiroko's plane rising, accompanied by the roar of the engine. The following shots use eye contact, creating the narrative illusion that Shu uses his eyes to see Hiroko off until the camera follows his uncle's movements. Turning your hand towards the building in front of you means that the new house you want to see is right in front of you, and we just come out of the psychological suggestion. In order to make the audience more convinced of the illusion that the two people are in the same time and space, this set of shots was deliberately made to have the same cold blue tone, which increased the deception. In the film, when Hiroko and Shu passed by each other, a series of front and back shots of different scenes were used to establish eye contact. Just when the audience thought the two were looking at each other, the next moment Shu's eyes However, she began to wander left and right, and then turned away. These actions indicated that she had not discovered Hiroko, so the audience thought that the two people's gazes in a closed space became an illusion. The two people did not appear in the famous scene of "meeting of the century". One party is alone in quiet shock, while the other party continues to be confused and confused, avoiding becoming cliché and returning to the general tone of the movie: the beauty of imperfections.

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