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The Expression of Hidden Love from Different Countries: Take the Films Love Letter (1995), Pride & Prejudice (2005), and Portrait of Lady on Fire (2019) as Examples

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Abstract. Hidden Love refers to the romantic feelings appearing between two characters that the director conveys without including explicit lines or direct expression about "Love", but the audience is still able to perceive the mutual affection among them. This essay selects Love Letter (Japan), Pride & Prejudice (UK), and Portrait of a Lady on Fire (France) as representative examples of Japanese, British, and French filmmaking styles, respectively. It analyzes the stories and visual expression of Hidden Love in each film. By examining the techniques used in these three films to depict Hidden Love, this study seeks to understand how love is expressed across different cultures and countries. In Love Letter, Hidden Love primarily occurs between the girl student, Fujii Itsuki, and the boy, Fujii Itsuki. The film mainly uses techniques such as period impressions, coloration, lines of characters, and character contrast to express this theme. In Pride & Prejudice, the essay will analyze the Hidden Love between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet, which primarily uses acting, the story of secondary characters, lighting, and empty shots to present the concept. Portrait of a Lady on Fire focuses on the Hidden Love of Heloise and Marianne, illustrating it through character interactions, music, and editing. The techniques used in these three films vary, reflecting the unique cultural characteristics of the countries they represent.

Keywords: Hidden Love, Cross-cultural film analysis, Romantic affection depiction

1. Introduction

As a comprehensive form of expression, film not only fulfills narrative functions but also expresses unique aesthetic styles across different cultural contexts. This paper focuses on the film arts of Japan, the UK, and France, analyzing film language as the primary object and the acting of actors as the secondary, to explore the differences and features in their portrayals of love. This research aims to use film as a medium and love as a main point, revealing the logic behind cultures and historical backgrounds.

It should be noted that the arguments mentioned in the paper do not represent absolute objectivity, but seek a balance between subjective experience and relevant references. The research method combines film viewing and close analysis to identify emotional clues implied by the director in the films, without explicit lines, for two central characters, and the shots used to present them,

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such as composition, editing, shot scales, lighting, and color. The paper also draws on relevant film theories and scholarly literature to support the analytical methods.

Through this comparative study, this paper hopes to reveal the different filming styles in Japan, the UK, and France in the expression of Hidden Love and to explain how a film tells a love story.

2. The expression of hidden love in *Love Letter*

The main characters in the film Love Letter are the boy Fujii Itsuki and the girl Fujii Itsuki, hereinafter referred to as the boy Fujii and the girl Fujii. The Hidden Love discussed in this paper primarily refers to the love between the boy Fujii and the girl Fujii during their high school years, as recalled by the girl Fujii.

2.1. Period impressions

The story of *Love Letter*, in the memory of the girl Fujii, and a considerable number of other Japanese film and television pieces (including animation) set their stories in the school years [1]. These school-age settings are always linked to the first stirring of Japanese students. For example, *EVA (1995), Monster (2023), and another work by Shunji Iwai (the same director of Love Letter), Last Letter (2020), all involve school-time settings and explore* the first love of Japanese youth. This period impression of high school life, with stirring, suggests that the Hidden Love lies in the memory of the girl Fujii from her school days.

Furthermore, the naming of the main characters — Fujii Itsuki and Fujii Ituski — is important. Two classmates with different sexes sharing the same name can easily become the topic of jokes about being a couple among other students. Such jokes are very common in schools. When they were competing with the librarian, a classmate submitted a slip with "Fujii Itsuki loves Fujii Itsuki" to make them feel embarrassed; another student deliberately drew a heart between the two names on the blackboard. The director uses these exaggerated, external expressions to imply their awkward relationship and the emerging Hidden Love between them.

2.2. Coloration

When the girl Fujii and the boy Fujii are both selected as librarians, there is a moment in the girl Fujii's perspective that the boy Fujii is reading near the window. The fluttering curtain occasionally covers the boy Fujii's face, symbolizing the inner emotional fluctuations. However, in the same location and shot, when the girl Fujii recalls the boy Fujii having gone away to another school, the scene uses a distinct blue tone, representing melancholy. In contrast, the scenes where the boy Fujii is still at school are noticeably pinker and warmer, symbolizing that the boy Fujii is a warm and beautiful figure in the girl Fujii's heart, which implies the Hidden Love [2].

In many of the scenes in the girl Fujii's memory, the shots are always saturated with warm yellow tones. One scene is when the two are cycling home from school together, and another is when the girl Fujii shakes her bike light to help the boy Fujii check his English answers. These highly saturated warm tones convey warmth and brightness, indicating that these memories are deeply beautiful to the girl Fujii and express the stirring love between them.

In the girl Fujii's memory, the playground is bathed in sunlight, with classmates in various colorful athletic outfits, creating a bright and vigorous atmosphere, and the boy Fujii is also seen running nearby. However, when the adult girl Fujii returns to the same playground years later to take

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photos, it appears desolate. The director uses an extreme wide shot to emphasize her solitude—an implication of the boy's absence and the girl's cherishing of her school days.

2.3. The lines of characters

When the boy Fujii visits the girl Fujii's home, he knows her father's death, he says, "どうも ご愁傷されて" — a phrase meaning "Please accept my deepest condolences." In Japanese grammar, this expression is highly unusual, as it stacks honorifics on top of each other in an almost awkward attempt to convey extreme politeness and formality. Based on the film's portrayal of the boy Fujii's personality, the audience knows he is mischievous and free-spirited. Yet upon hearing of the girl's father's passing, he uses such weird but respectful language—a contrast to his usual characteristic—which further reveals his deep respect for her.

2.4. Discussion

Director Shunji Iwai tells the story of the boy Fujii and the girl Fujii at a very slow pace. Throughout the girl Fujii's memory, there is no single explicit expression of "love". Nevertheless, through period impressions of first love, the use of colors, and contrasts in character dialogue and behavior, the audience can clearly perceive the unspoken, hidden affection between the boy and the girl.

3. The expression of hidden love in the film Pride & Prejudice

This part primarily discusses the Hidden Love between Elizabeth Bennet and Fitzwilliam Darcy, who will hereafter be referred to as Elizabeth and Mr. Darcy for the purposes of the analysis.

3.1. The performance of characters

In the 2005 version of *Pride & Prejudice*, the clearest way for audiences to see Mr. Darcy fall in love with Elizabeth is through actor Matthew Macfadyen's performance and physical gestures. In the first moment, when Mr. Darcy meets Elizabeth at the social ball, he glances at her, then looks at her again. When Elizabeth looks back at him, a close-up shows Darcy immediately averting his gaze. In this scene, Macfadyen's performance clearly reveals that Mr. Darcy is falling in love with Elizabeth at first sight.

The second scene depicts Mr. Darcy assisting Elizabeth into the carriage by grasping her hand. The filmmaker presents a close-up of his hand, during which he momentarily flexes his fingers, signifying his intense attention on touching Elizabeth.After letting go, Mr. Darcy deeply looks at Elizabeth. These close-up details subtly suggest Mr. Darcy's Hidden Love for Elizabeth.

However, because only a few close-up shots show Darcy's performance with nearly 20 seconds, and because there is no explicit hint of Darcy's feelings for Elizabeth before his proposal in the rain has been rejected, audiences who miss these subtle details may think his proposal is abrupt.

3.2. Lighting

Lighting plays a major role in conveying affection [3]. During Mr. Darcy's proposal in the rain, Elizabeth rejects him due to her prejudice against him and the subtle pride embedded in his words. Later, when Darcy visits Elizabeth's home again to deliver a letter explaining the misunderstandings between them, the director uses a frontal shot of Elizabeth with two types of lighting simultaneously: warm light on the right and cool light on the left. Through this use of contrasting

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colors, the director suggests that Elizabeth's prejudice against Mr. Darcy is no longer one-sided but is now in conflict. From this point, her prejudice against Mr. Darcy begins to dissolve gradually, prompting her to reconsider who he truly is and to reevaluate her feelings toward him.

3.3. The use of shots

In this film, the audience becomes aware of Elizabeth's Hidden Love for Mr. Darcy through numerous empty shots (shots without dialogue) [4]. After Elizabeth finishes reading the letter Mr. Darcy gives her, the director presents many shots of Elizabeth without lines. These include a scene of her lying alone quietly in bed that night, a shot of her standing on a cliff looking straight, and a scene of her visiting Mr. Darcy's gallery. Before the film's midpoint, the audience knows that Elizabeth is a straightforward, open girl. However, after the midpoint, these numerous empty shots convey that Elizabeth is very quiet and silent—a contrast to her earlier personality. These empty shots give the audience time to gaze directly at her. They also hint that Elizabeth begins to reconsider her true feelings for Mr. Darcy, showing her gradual shift from complete prejudice and disgust to acceptance and love.

3.4. The story of secondary roles

The scriptwriter adds numerous dialogues for secondary characters to hint at Mr. Darcy's hidden love for Elizabeth [4]. First, the audience knows that Darcy initially does not approve of his friend Mr. Bingley's marriage to Elizabeth's sister Jane, as he believes that the daughters of country gentry are all seeking to marry people who are rich and of high status. However, after the film's midpoint, Mr. Darcy actively helps Bingley propose to Jane, which implies a transformation in his attitude toward daughters of the country gentry and a retreat of his pride.

Secondly, on one occasion when Elizabeth visits Mr. Darcy's home, she meets Mr. Darcy's sister. Upon first seeing Elizabeth, Darcy's sister says, "My brother has told me so much about you. I feel as if we are friends already." Through this line, the audience understands that Mr. Darcy frequently mentions Elizabeth to his sister. When audiences view this scene, and Mr. Darcy's sisters are talking, they know that Mr. Darcy is remarkably generous to Elizabeth and fascinated by her. This hints at Mr. Darcy's affection for Elizabeth.

Next, one of Elizabeth's younger sisters elopes with a soldier. But when her sister returns, she says that someone paid the soldier to bring her back. Later, we learn that this person was Mr. Darcy.

Through the story of Mr. Bingley and Jane, the words of Darcy's sister, and the story of Elizabeth's younger sister, the audience understands that Darcy is forgiving to Elizabeth and has done much for the lady he loves. These secondary character narratives all suggest Mr. Darcy's Hidden Love.

3.5. Discussion

The 2005 version of *Pride & Prejudice* presents the emotional development between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth at a relatively quick pace. Although in the novel Mr. Darcy does not fall in love with Elizabeth at first glance, the director simplifies the original characters' complex, shifting emotions to convey Mr. Darcy's Hidden Love.

In addition, the director adds numerous stories of secondary characters, using them to imply the feelings between Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth. The director also incorporates many empty shots and lighting techniques to express the characters' internal emotional transformations.

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4. The expression of hidden love in film: Portrait of a Lady on Fire

This section primarily discusses the hidden love between Marianne and Héloïse in this film.

4.1. Interactions of characters

In this film, the director uses the interactions between the two characters to convey the gradual development of their emotions. The first time Marianne and Héloïse sit together by the sea, we see from Marianne's perspective as she looks toward Héloïse, who does not look back at her. But when Marianne turns to look at her again, Héloïse is looking back at her at that moment. This scene, with no dialogue and relying solely on eye contact, gives the audience sufficient hints that a story will be told within the two [5].

Furthermore, the film features numerous close-ups of both characters' eyes [6], especially Héloïse's. The actresses' emotions are conveyed through their eyes, allowing the audience to perceive the characters' personalities, their passion for love, their longing, and their reluctance to be apart.

At the beginning, Héloïse does not want to be painted. However, when Héloïse accepts being painted by Marianne, it reflects an attitudinal and emotional transformation within Héloïse toward Marianne. During the painting process, the eye contact and facial expressions between the two characters as they stand closer confirm the deepening intimacy of their relationship.

4.2. Music

Music in the film only appears three times. The following will analyze how these three musical emergences suggest the Hidden Love between Marianne and Héloïse.

The first appearance of music occurs when the two are playing the piano together. Marianne teaches Héloïse how to play the piano, and they sit close together, indicating that their relationship has shifted from strangers to friends. The notes Marianne plays gradually become intense, and she describes them as waves and winds, strong and hinting at the emerging, immense affections between them [7].

The second appearance of music takes place at the bonfire gathering. Many women have assembled there, and a choral voice grows increasingly intense. Marianne and Héloïse look at each other across the fire. As they look at one another over the flames, the song reaches its climax, during which the voice is high, and Héloïse's dress catches fire immediately after that. This music, along with their eye contact and even the flame on her dress, suggests the Hidden Love burning within both of them. After Héloïse steps away from the fire, the music pauses for a moment. Then, as Héloïse is pushed to the ground by the crowd to extinguish the fire, the background music shifts to a lower key, implying that their love will ultimately be destroyed by reality.

The third appearance of music occurs at the end of the film. Marianne sits across from Héloïse in a theater. The music gradually rises from simple tones to overwhelming. From Marianne's perspective, the audience watches her vision of Héloïse, who gradually begins to cry as she listens to the music. The rising music represents Héloïse's inner emotions, gradually building from low to high until she tears. Héloïse and Marianne cannot be together forever, even though their love for each other continues to grow and intensify. In the end, Héloïse's tears seem like an overflow of her love -- her body cannot contain such immense affection, and the tears burst forth along with the music.

Throughout the film, ambient sound is used predominantly, and music appears very few times. However, each musical appearance deepens their relationship and expresses intense emotion without

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dialogue. It perfectly illustrates the concept of Hidden Love.

4.3. Editing

After Héloïse's dress catches fire and the crowd extinguishes her, Marianne reaches her hand to help her up. At this moment, the director uses a match cut, transitioning from the nighttime bonfire gathering to the seaside in daylight outside. This abrupt editing, the leap in time, and the change of setting given to the audience provide a sense of being unable to distinguish between reality and dream. As they walk along the shore, they stand very close to one another, and the audience can also hear their breath. Through the distance between the two characters, the audience can already perceive their subtle emotions, yet there is not a single line of dialogue. In this scene, viewers can feel the intense but forbearing love between Marianne and Héloïse.

4.4. Discussion

In the *French film Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, the director uses techniques in acting, such as character interaction and eye contact, and in editing, including music and special shots, to convey the Hidden Love between Marianne and Héloïse. The director employs a few lines of dialogue that directly express love, numerous close-up shots, and character interactions to convey the relationship between the two, and intense music to build their immense affection gradually. Editing techniques and cinematographic language are also used, shaping this film into a living painting.

5. Comparison of the different techniques used in the three films

These three films distinctively reveal the styles and characteristics of their respective national films.

Love Letter sets its background during the school years, a period many Japanese films favor. This setting allows the audience to perceive the feelings between the boy Fujii and the girl Fujii without explicit lines. The director also uses highly saturated warm and pink tones to imply the love in the story. The director of *Love Letter*, Shunji Iwai, has stated that he wanted to use DV to create a film-like texture. The Japanese film industry also has a strong cinematographic foundation (such as Sony), which drives its films toward beautiful compositions and a sense of nostalgia. This aesthetic also enhances the stirring, blurring love that suggests the emotional pull between the boy Fujii and the girl Fujii. The director also incorporates some cues, such as character contrasts, to express the panic of love. For example, the mischievous boy Fujii uses double honorifics to express his condolences to the girl Fujii. In the novel version of Love Letter, when the adult girl Fujii sees her own portrait drawn on the bookmark that the boy Fujii once borrowed, she panics and seeks her pocket, but she forgets that her favorite apron has no pockets. This sense of panic and the contrast with her usual character both express the Hidden Love between them. The narrative pacing of Love Letter is very slow and lacks explicit lines stating that the boy Fujii likes the girl Fujii. Yet through the techniques described above, the audience can be aware of the love between the two.

Pride & Prejudice uses the most noticeable method to express Hidden Love: the actors' performances. The director employs close-up shots to allow the audience to see some specific behaviour and gestures of Mr. Darcy when he is facing Elizabeth, such as his averted gaze and his focused hand. The script incorporates plenty of dialogue and secondary-character stories as hints. Through the words of these secondary characters, the audience learns of Mr. Darcy's affection and love for Elizabeth. The director also adds lighting effects, empty shots, and other techniques to express Elizabeth's inner struggle and transformation. The overall romantic narrative pacing of this

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film is relatively fast (a result of narrative compression), and the expression of Hidden Love relies mainly on the characters' detailed performances. Compared to *Love Letter* and *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, it conveys love more directly and faster.

Portrait of a Lady on Fire primarily uses the interactions and emotional pull between the two characters to imply the Hidden Love. The film employs numerous close-up shots of the characters' eyes as they look into each other's eyes. In real life, prolonged eye contact might trigger discomfort or embarrassment. Still, in this film, it instead encompasses many mutual gazes (as a form of interaction) to convey the gradually deepening relationship between Marianne and Héloïse: from unfamiliarity and observation to affection, as Héloïse's gaze toward Marianne deepens. In addition, the relationship between the two characters is never explicitly expressed. The use of three musics provides cues as a substitute for dialogue, allowing the music to reveal the gradually intensifying emotions of the characters and their growing closeness. Editing techniques are also used to make the expression of love blurred yet intimate. The emotional pacing of the entire film is slower than that of Pride & Prejudice but faster than that of Love Letter. The director focuses on both the actors' interactions and the composition of each shot. Extended close-ups ensure the audience misses no details of the emotional development and encourage closer observation of the roles. The addition of vocal music and classical pieces heightens the emotions, making the film highly artistic.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined and analyzed the expression of "Hidden Love" through comparing three films, *Love Letter (Japan), Pride & Prejudice (UK), and Portrait of a Lady on Fire (France)*, to study the unique techniques, styles, and characteristics used by different countries. By focusing on hidden details rather than explicit dialogue, this study reveals how directors from distinct cultural contexts convey romantic affection through different strategies, such as period impression(primarily used in *Love Letter*), performances of actors(primarily used in *Pride & Prejudice*), and music(primarily used in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*).

Love Letter employs school-life settings and a warm color palette to express love through memory, requiring audience patience through its deliberately slow narrative pacing. In contrast, *Pride & Prejudice* relies on performance, like Mr. Darcy's focused hand and the averted gaze, as well as the story of the secondary character and filming techniques like lighting and colors, reflecting a British preference for focusing on narrative. *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* offers a third approach, constructing a "living painting" style through the mutual gaze, long, close-up shots, and three uses of music as a substitute for direct verbal expression.

These distinctive techniques demonstrate how cultural aesthetics shape the expression of Hidden Love in film. Japanese cinema emphasizes atmosphere in filming, British cinema focuses on performances and social settings, while French cinema emphasizes the expression of visual (eye contact) and audio (music) scenes.

These films illustrate that Hidden Love finds its most powerful expression not in words, but in the eloquent silence of the image.

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