

A Study on Japanese Healing Films from Visual, Sound, and Narrative Aspects

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Abstract: Nowadays, people are increasingly dependent on the media to meet their needs. Healing movie is a kind of film which aims to make the audiences' emotions be positively affected and to feel satisfied. Previous studies on the birthplace of healing culture, Japan and Japanese healing films have found some formal and thematic characteristics of Japanese healing films. Based on the previous studies, this paper, after an observation and analysis of 50 Japanese healing films, looks at three aspects of filmmaking: visual design, sound design, and plot narrative, summarized the features of Japanese healing films in the production technology that serve to achieve the purpose of healing people's mood. The results also found recurring thematic elements that have been discussed in previous studies, such as nature worship, simplicity, and innocence. Importantly, this research analyzed through the focus on visual, sound, and narrative aspects that the Japanese healing filmmakers prioritize the preservation of the portrayal of life's simplicity and beauty. They consciously steer away from depicting tragedy, turmoil, and complex societal issues in their films. That is, they are on the one hand trying to restore reality, showing that almost unadorned beauty, while avoiding realistic cruelty.

Keywords: healing films, visual, sound, narrative

1. Introduction

In today's technologically driven world, various forms of media have seamlessly integrated into the very fabric of modern life. Among them, movies, as a medium that has transcended generations, are firmly rooted in people's hearts with their captivating narrative and visually immersive landscape. For decades, watching movies has already been a kind of entertainment that people are accustomed to and universally recognized and enjoyed. With its ability to captivate and engage, movies offer a shared experience that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. In essence, watching movies gratifies multifaceted human needs. Movies provide information, serve as a companion, fill people's spare time and so on. Notably, healing movies align with the uses and gratification theory's four human needs: information, personal identity, integration, and social interaction [1].

Healing movies aim to provide viewers with emotional comfort, relief, and inspiration, often by portraying warm and peaceful stories without intense and dramatic elements, offering characters' beautiful and transformative journeys toward inner peace and resolution through gentle and serene narratives. The word healing means to make someone healthy again with a therapeutic or clinical meaning. However, in the context of healing movies, the term healing tends to refer to the healing

effect of one's negative emotions; it may not cure, "healing" here refers to a delightful and comfortable experience that clears away worries. This concept of healing style originated in Japan, and it was first proposed referring to certain types of music that are soothing and relaxing emerged in Japan in the 1990s [2]. In 1999, Japanese singer Ryu Sakamoto released a single with the label "Healing Music", which became a hit, and the concept of healing became the buzzword of that year in Japan, referring to any movie, music, novel, food, that can relax people, calm their minds, and release their emotions; The healing culture then gradually extended to literature, toys, stars, animation and other fields in Japanese people's lives [3].

If looking closely at the history of Japan, in the second half of the 20th century, Japan experienced a rapid modernization process, and the pace of life was increasingly fast. People lacked spiritual comfort. From 1986 to 1991, Japan experienced a bubble economy, which resulted in a rapid recession in the Japanese economy. With its special geographical location, as an island country surrounded by ocean, earthquakes are frequent, and land and natural resources are scarce in Japan [2]. People were struggling with the cruel reality. At this time, Japan was in a massive panic, feeling that their souls had no place to belong, and they began to question the meaning of life [4]. People then began to look for some emotional sustenance and vent their emotions unconsciously; the healing film then became one of the supports for the audience to heal [2], which was exactly what people needed at that time.

Subsequently, the distinctive qualities of healing films, that they intended to comfort audiences' emotions and meet people's needs during moments of significance, set them apart from other movies and consequently amassed substantial acclaim from audiences. Moreover, the healing culture and healing movies gradually extended beyond Japan to various global regions and cultures. This expansion owes to their purposeful resonance with individuals and their ability to delight the audience.

To achieve the relaxing and healing vibes, certain conventions and elements of healing movies make them able to consistently positively affect the audiences' emotions. The filmmakers manipulate multiple aspects of filmmaking to please the audience. Controlled factors such as visuals, music and sound effects, themes, and pacing all add to the healing experience. They expertly employ these cinematic elements to evoke specific feelings in audiences. Therefore, in the healing films, many characteristics and techniques are almost conventions, which are very important elements to help achieve the healing effect. These intended orchestrations foster deeper connections that create emotional engagement and empathy. Consequently, healing movies are like well-designed recipes that filmmakers create to make viewers feel well and emotionally refreshed.

2. Literature Review

Zhou summarized the characteristics of Japanese healing movies in her writing, highlighting their distinct qualities. These movies have a refreshing style and heartwarming plots, and their serene pacing comforts and cleanses the audience's thoughts fosters emotional warmth, and purifies their minds. However, these films tend to shy away from realism and societal critique in their themes and settings; with no huge dramas nor conflicts, the plot is natural and gentle. Characters' relationships are portrayed with simplicity and authenticity, capturing real-life sentiments through intricate details to construct a psychological platform that resonates with viewers, offering solace and effectively countering negative emotions [5].

The characteristics of healing films are maintained consistently by many conventional features and elements in filmmaking. As Zhang analyzed in her work, in Japanese healing films with soothing plots and images of natural scenery, those gentle visual elements of cherry blossoms and waves, rural forests, rice balls and Japanese traditional food become recurring cultural anchors [6]. Zhang then further focused on the era of Japanese urbanization, alienation among people in Japan, and the series of practical problems and fears in society, contrasting with the worship of nature and the countryside

in the healing films. She referred to movies such as the *Little Forest* series by Junichi Mori, *There Is No Lid on the Sea* by Keisuke Toyoshima, *The Mohican Comes Home* by Shuichi Okita, etc., pointing out the recurring theme of young people returning to their hometown or countryside. Zhang argued that the repetition of these themes in healing films aligns with the reconstruction of traditional Japanese culture: the return to the rural nature and pastoral life that symbolizes traditional culture. By doing so, healing films offer a respite from the squeeze of struggling life in modern cities [6].

From the perspective of the visual elements in filmmaking, the worship of nature and countryside complements mutually with the healing movies' visually pleasing elements. No part of Japan is more than 70 miles from the sea, and high mountains can be seen all around. The rainfall is plenty throughout the year, green grass, dense forests, and the changing seasons make the scenery very colorful [6]. Since nature is one of the important themes in the healing films, it is common and indispensable to show these beautiful views. The countryside, forests, and nature then naturally beautify the visual experience that the audience spectated. Ye analyzed in her work that the Japanese movie *Love Letter*, a heartwarming healing movie directed by Shunji Iwai, depicted a story that takes place on snowy days in Hokkaido; the snow scene presents a pure and beautiful white color tone throughout the film, giving the audience a very thorough, pure and calm mind [2]. As Ye stated, most audiences are drawn to healing movies because they have a chill and relaxed feeling after watching them, which includes the bright and refreshing colors and natural scenery. This cinematic experience caters to the urban population's desire for respite from their hectic lives. Thus, this worship and emphasis on nature and the countryside not only offers visual delight but also fulfills a psychological need, providing a holistic satisfaction to the audience [2].

Besides, another feature of Japanese healing movies is that many of them focus on the portrayal and prominence of the images of children and adolescents, often presenting characters that embody youthful innocence and purity. In essence, these movies underscore the unspoiled nature and untainted qualities inherent in these characters. Zhou referred to Japanese movies *Bunny Drop* directed by Saibu, *Rebirth* by Izuru Narushima, *Helen the Baby Fox* by Keita Kono, etc., as examples; she dissected these films to reveal that these movies intentionally confine the audiences' perspectives to a childlike realm, and consciously reduce the complexity of the character's background and personality, showing a kind of simplicity and kindness that the audience can no longer easily feel in the fast-paced real life, make them feel like kids again, and provide a soothing and stable viewing experience for the audience [5].

Similarly, Japanese healing films' stories and space settings also pursue simplicity and highlight ordinary daily life. According to Wang and Cai, most Japanese films are good at showing the magnificent spirit in the plain. They are proficient in employing ordinary scenes from daily life to implicate and interact with the audience's infinite, rich inner world. Therefore, there are no grand battle scenes, fierce martial action, or conflicts of various coincidences and misunderstandings in the stories of Japanese healing films. Instead, they intricately weave narratives using fragments of everyday existence [7]. According to Wei, the non-dramatize narrative of the daily life-like plot restores the original appearance of the story plot as it is in real life, moreover, these close to the daily scenes greatly mobilize the emotional resonance of the audience [8].

In Wang and Cai's paper, they also emphasized the role of nature in Japanese healing films, stating that in addition to the concern for simple and real social life, the best way for humans to be cured is to return the focus to nature. They pointed out the Japanese philosophy that human beings are inseparable from nature, and the Japanese healing films continued and presented this attachment to and admiration for nature [7]. Liu also pointed to a similar philosophy in Japanese healing movies, which is that if life hurts one, it doesn't matter because there always will be nature, the sky and the earth surrounding and embracing [9]. Therefore, as Guan stated, the key of nature as a essential element in Japanese Healing Movies is the constant scenery of the four seasons, in order to make the

audience to remove the Therefore, as Guan stated, the key of nature as an essential element in Japanese Healing Movies is the constant scenery of the four seasons, to make the audience remove their psychological defensive lines [10].

These studies above showed significant characteristics and the vibe of Japanese healing films, such as the essential role of nature in these movies, the contrast with the fast life in the city, the innocent and childlike characters, and the pursuit of simplicity and portrayal of trivial details in ordinary lives. However, studies have yet to be found conducting comprehensive research that delves into Japanese healing movies' distinctive features from filmmaking aspects. While these films are appreciated for their ability to provide emotional solace and resonate with audiences, despite many important themes and elements being studied, there needs to be more scholarly investigation into the specific cinematic techniques employed to achieve these effects. Existing research has often concentrated on the thematic and cultural dimensions of healing movies, neglecting the meticulous craftsmanship involved in their creation.

This study bridges this research gap, looking at Japanese healing movies to gain a comprehensive exploration of the visual aesthetics, sound design, and narrative strategies within Japanese healing films as a single cinematic category. Current research is critical for uncovering the complex technique that underpins the success of healing movies as a genre in evoking comfort and emotional revival in audiences, providing filmmakers and scholars with valuable insights into the delicate world of Japanese healing cinema.

3. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative observational research method to examine unique and representative characteristics of Japanese healing movies that make them achieve healing effects. A sample of 50 representative Japanese healing movies, including both anime movies (25) and live-action movies (25), are purposely selected and have a production time range from the 1980s to the 2020s. Data collection includes systematic viewing and analysis of these movies, focusing on three critical aspects of filmmaking: visual elements, sound design, and narrative and plot. Mise-en-scène, character portrayal, and cinematography are scrutinized within the visual elements; the sound design analysis encompasses film music and sound effects; the narrative and plot examination involve the identification of recurring patterns in plots, themes, storytelling techniques. Therefore, the three aspects being examined cover all the audiovisual experience of the audience in the process of watching the movies, and thus are worth being interpreted in order to understand what contribute to the healing effects. The recurring characteristics of these three main aspects in the 50 films, which are the film-making techniques and manipulations that the filmmakers repeatedly used in Japanese healing films to achieve the healing effect, will be summarized and analyzed. This research aims to offer insights into the deliberate cinematic strategies Japanese filmmakers employ to create emotionally resonant healing movies. Acknowledging potential subjectivity and researcher bias, this study mitigates these concerns through triangulation of findings.

4. Results

4.1. Visual Elements

Among studied Japanese healing movies, all of them have warm, fresh, bright color tones most of the time. For instance, the *Little Forest* series movies depicted the story of Japanese girl Ichiko returning to her hometown Komori which is located on a mountain in the Tohoku region. The film series is divided into two episodes, divided into four units in the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter, presenting the beauty of the four seasons of the small village. In these movies, the film has a large number of natural scenery and village scenery shots, green trees, water, crops full of life,

showing the natural beauty of Japan's countryside. The beauty of these shots of the landscapes is not modified, so the picture naturally presents a large number of real, bright, vibrant colors. This characteristic is also reflected in other samples such as the movies *Kikujiro* by Takeshi Kitano, the animated movie *My Neighbor Totoro* by Hayao Miyazaki and so on.

Another finding is that a lot of medium shots and close-ups scenes are employed to depict their characters, things they're doing, or common and mundane objects in lives, which create a sense of simple everyday life. Once again, take the film *Little Forest* as an example, in the portrayal of the natural village life in the film, there are many medium shots or close-ups of the protagonist interacting with nature or just doing simple things in daily life. The filmmakers focus on depicting the protagonist Ichiko does all kinds of farm work such as weeding, harvesting fruits and vegetables. Moreover, in addition to being in nature, there are many scenes of Ichiko doing housework, washing dishes, cooking in her small home, although there is no rare precious or luxurious food, the film lens also focuses on those ingredients, tools, and the birth of ordinary but fresh and delicious looking food.

4.2. Music and Sound Effects

Japanese healing movies often have healing soothing theme songs or background music. An example is the famous music *Summer* by Joe Hisaishi, which Hisaishi composed as the title track for the movie *Kikujiro*. With its flowing melody and upbeat rhythm, the music paints a vivid picture of summer days. The music captures the feeling of summer vibes, and together with the summer scenes in the movie, transports the audience to serene landscapes of summer adventures that the characters are in. Similarly, this phenomenon of healing movies with healing music is very frequent. Another example is in the film *Spirited Away* also by Hayao Miyazaki, Hisaishi's compositions such as *One Summer's Day* is also slow and relaxing, in line with the tone of the pictures and the emotion of the plot, every note lightly hit and heals the audiences' hearts.

From a sound effects perspective, Japanese healing films usually focus on the white noise in life, trying to recreate the calming and real noises of life. In the films being examined, these real-life noise effects include nature sounds, such as wind blowing through leaves, ocean waves, and raindrops. Meanwhile, it also includes the sounds of little things people do in their daily lives, such as the sound of Ichiko cooking and working in *Little Forest*, and likewise, the story of the movie, *There Is No Lid on the Sea*, is about a Japanese girl Mari returning to the countryside to open a snow cone shop. There are scenes in this film showing the process of making shaved ice. By showing the sound of rotating the ice shaving machine along with the pictures of making a bowl of shaved ice, the filmmakers recreate these details of life not only through the pictures but also the sounds.

4.3. Narrative and Plot

Japanese healing movie makers have taken great care to skillfully separate and contrast the healing film from the cruelty of reality. In terms of narrative, if there is a tragedy in the movies, it will be before the beginning of the story in the film, or as the beginning of the healing movie, that is, the main plot of the film will be like the rainbow after the storm, which is the comfort after the tragedy. These characteristics can be found in movies such as *Our Little Sister* directed by Hirokazu Koreeda, *Kamome Diner* by Naoko Ogigami, both movies started with the death of a loved one of the characters, then focus on the protagonist's life after the unfortunate, and do not have much portrayal of the tragedies. Similarly, to contrast with the cruel reality, many healing films begin with the protagonists leaving the present situation, embarking on a new journey, or moving to another place to start a new life. Movies such as *Kamome Diner*, *Kikujiro*, *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away* and many other studied movies have been observed to have the same concept.

Another method that the filmmakers use to create a contrast with the real-life unfortunate is to include surreal elements in these movies, this feature can be seen mainly in animated healing films, such as *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, and *Ponyo*, where filmmakers create characters, objects, and even places that do not exist in reality. Moreover, in the movie by Makoto Shinkai, *Your Name*, there are even supernatural things that cannot happen in reality, when the two main characters accidentally exchange their souls in the movie.

5. Discussion

The findings on Japanese healing movies' delightful, natural and vibrant visuals are consistent with previous studies on the worship of nature in Japanese healing movies. The worship of nature in Japanese culture, and their belief that human and nature are inseparable, goes hand in hand with the beautiful visuals presented in the film. Moreover, with the idea that integrating into nature is the best healing out of the social life, with these understandings, by simply recording, amplifying and presenting the beauty of nature has created the most beautiful scenery scenes presented in Japanese healing films, which offers enjoyable watching experiences to the audiences.

Besides, the finding of lots of use of medium or close-up shots of the characters and objects, as well as lots of use of real life-like noises in Japanese healing movies, suggest that the filmmakers try to depict real things and sounds to present the unembellished beauty of simple life. These scenes, such as characters cooking, are usually shown in a common way that has a slow pace. There is no dramatic plot or complicated expression mixed in it, instead, it is usually presented in a documentary style. By watching these clips, the audience passively slows down thoughts in their minds, and can only see what is presented on the screen at the moment. That is to say, the audiences passively focus on the things on the screen that they usually ignore or never seriously experience because they are just too ordinary. Consequently, the audience's attention is farther away from those complex, sad, or realistic pressures and troubles, and feeling healed.

The sound effects in Japanese healing films serve to replicate real life and nature's ambiance, akin to ASMR, offering soothing auditory and enjoyable experiences. Yet, these sound effects focus less on standing out and more on complement enhancing the on-screen visuals. They seamlessly match the images on screens, better mimicking real life sequences and contributing to the overall healing experience.

By contrast, the music and score in Japanese healing movies are more present, because they are not just the dubbing of some actions on screens, but play a more significant role in specific plots and fragments in the movies. Often, the music can appear in the movie when there are no lines, presenting clips consisting only music and moving pictures. Successful healing film music is also appreciated as healing music on its own, like *Summer* by Hisaishi. Many people who have not seen *Kikujiro* have listened to this music because it has already appeared in many places as healing or just background music. In other words, this music is liked and able to heal even without the movies, which is different from the sound effects. Nevertheless, most Japanese healing films and the film music are mutually reinforcing.

While many above findings suggest Japanese healing movies strive to capture the serene beauty of ordinary existence, this study's examination of narrative and plot elements reveals a deliberate contrast with reality. The filmmakers endeavor to drag the movies away from the cruelty and darkness of the real world. This finding aligns with prior research and caters to the purpose of the Japanese healing movies, which is to provide respite from real life troubles for a short time in order to experience happiness. The results show that many of these movies start with the protagonists having experienced some tragedies, and this is reflected in the audience's viewing experience, as the audience are able to momentarily set aside their own troubles and follow the protagonist to start on a

happy life or an adventure. In essence, Japanese healing films craft a departure and contrast from the complicated and cruel reality while depicting those simple and delightful ordinary things in life.

To create a contrast to the real world, this study's results suggested that animated movies are great carriers to achieve and present things rooted solely in the realm of imagination. Therefore, in Japanese healing animation films, filmmakers are more successful in creating characters and things that do not exist in reality, and even things that cannot happen in real life. This approach brings the audiences to very distinct situations from their everyday lives, resulting in a heightened feeling of detachment from their own troubles. Thus, as viewers immerse themselves in these newly created worlds, they could respite from their concerns and discover a newfound sense of happiness.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study is consistent with the findings of previous research and at the same time has some new comprehensive understandings on some features of filmmaking techniques of Japanese healing movies. In addition to identifying some recurring cultural and thematic concepts in Japanese healing films in terms of culture and themes, such as nature worship, simplicity, innocence, absence of conflict and drama, this paper systematically sorted some characteristics from three dimensions of filmmaking: visual elements, sound design, and narrative and plot. Findings suggest that to achieve the healing effect, which is to positively affect the viewers' emotions during their cinema experience, Japanese healing filmmakers follow the pursuit of preserving the presentation of simple and beautiful things in life while avoiding and minimizing the depiction of tragedy, trouble and complex social problems in these movies. This deliberate balance contributes to the creation of an emotionally uplifting and comforting cinematic experience for viewers.

Specifically, since Japanese healing movies were born when Japan and its society experienced many natural as well as man-made disasters, when people are depressed and could not take any more stress and pain, the healing films were deliberately designed to achieve a soothing effect. Thus, as the results suggested, Japanese healing films have beautiful, vibrant visuals and magnify the simple things in life on screens. In terms of sound effects, the filmmakers strictly choose appropriate sound effects to enhance the audience's audio-visual experience of these beautiful simple things. At the same time, many Japanese healing films have melodious movie music or theme songs, which make the audience feel comforted even after watching the movie. Finally, Japanese healing films reduce the portrayal of tragedy and misfortune in narrative and plot, and try to make the audience forget those sufferings. Instead, they depict more of the protagonists' pursuits of happiness and inner peace, so most of the time the films are delightful and positive. Moreover, many of these films, mainly animated movies, also create things that cannot exist or happen in real life to reinforce the difference between the dark reality, as a result, the audience gets to think about more and better possibilities in life.

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