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Article

The Aesthetic of Mono no Aware in the Film Kwaidan

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Abstract: As a spiritual value deeply rooted in Japanese cultural consciousness, *mono no aware* permeates multiple cultural and artistic forms. This paper takes Masaki Kobayashi's film *Kwaidan* as the primary object of study and analyzes how the film visualizes, narrativizes, and modernizes the tradition of *mono no aware*. Drawing from aesthetics, film theory, Japanese literature, and cultural studies, the article contextualizes *mono no aware* within the broader genealogy of Japanese aesthetics—including yūgen, wabi-sabi, and Buddhist conceptions of impermanence. Through the symbolic use of seasonal imagery, spatial constructions imbued with *yūgen*, and Noh-inspired performance techniques, the film articulates a cinematic translation of Motoori Norinaga's idea of "knowing mono no aware." Ultimately, the paper argues that *Kwaidan* not only recreates classical Japanese aesthetics but also presents a modern reflection on life, death, and emotional fragility.

Keywords: mono no aware; Kwaidan; Masaki Kobayashi

The film *Kwaidan,* directed by Masaki Kobayashi, is a classic work of Japanese horror cinema. Released in 1965, it was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the 38th Academy Awards in 1966. The film adapts several stories from Lafcadio Hearn's collection *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*. Through the four yūgen-infused tales—*Black Hair*, *The Snow Woman*, *Hōichi the Earless*, and *In a Cup of Tea*—the film elevates the aesthetics of *mono no aware* to their highest expression.

Through its uncanny narrative structure and poetic audiovisual language, the director weaves *mono no aware* into the lamentation over life's impermanence and the compassion toward the futility of human obsessions. As a core element of traditional Japanese aesthetics, *mono no aware* has a long and profound history. It highlights the distinctive qualities of Japanese literature and embodies the unique aesthetic sensibilities of the Japanese people.

1. The Formation and Evolution of the Aesthetic of *mono no aware*

In Shinto, there is the notion of "eight million deities," signifying that divine spirits permeate all aspects of the natural world. Mountains, rivers, trees, wind, and even seemingly inert objects are believed to possess spiritual presence. This animistic worldview, shaped by early Japanese religiosity, cultivated a profound sensitivity to nature and its rhythms. Life's emergence and disappearance were seen not merely as biological processes but as manifestations of a deeper, eternal power that governs all existence. Within such a cosmology—where humans and nature are not separate but mutually permeating—the aesthetic sensibility of *mono no aware* naturally took root. The emotional stirring that arises before seasonal transformation, the blooming and withering of flowers, or the passing of time was not

accidental but embedded in a worldview that acknowledged impermanence as the very condition of being. The term *mono no aware* first appeared in Ki no Tsurayuki's *Tosa Diary*, though it lacked a clearly defined aesthetic meaning at the time. Yet its usage already revealed a sensitivity to emotional nuance and the capacity to be moved by external phenomena. The concept became more fully realized in *The Tale of Genji*, where human emotions are depicted with unparalleled subtlety. The novel's recurring vocabulary of "aware" and kanashi points to a delicate emotional mode characterized by softness, vulnerability, and the pathos of human transience. Through its portrayal of love, loss, and ephemerality, Genji laid the literary foundation upon which later theorists would construct the formal aesthetics of *mono no aware*.

It was Motoori Norinaga who gave *mono no aware* its explicit theoretical formulation. In his *Essentials of The Tale of Genji*, he articulated that the emotional power of the narrative emerges from its expression of aware: "Among the various human emotions, only distress, melancholy, and sorrow—namely, all the things that do not go as one wishes—move people most profoundly" (Zhu, 2017). This statement reveals Motoori's conviction that true emotional depth arises not from joy or harmony but from those aspects of life that resist human will. In *The Japanese Spirit of Mono no Aware*, Motoori further elaborates the idea of "knowing mono no aware": "Everything in the world, in all its diverse forms—whether what the eye sees, what the ear hears, or what the body touches—is gathered into the heart, savored, and understood. This is to perceive the 'heart of things' and the 'heart of events'; this is 'knowing *mono no aware*'" (Motoori, 2010). For Motoori, *mono no aware* emerges from naturally arising human emotions and reflects a compassionate, gentle receptivity toward all phenomena. It entails an empathetic engagement with the world: one senses deeply the transformations of life yet remains powerless to prevent them. The classic example is the cherry blossom, whose beauty is inseparable from its fragility and brief lifespan. Watching the petals fall evokes not despair but a contemplative sadness that affirms impermanence as a universal truth.In this way, *mono no aware* becomes an affective bridge between human experience and the natural world.

Motoori emphasized grounding *mono no aware* in natural human sensibility, localizing it as a distinctively Japanese mode of emotional expression characterized by compassion and awareness of impermanence. Consequently, *mono no aware* is often linked to symbols of transience—falling blossoms, fading light, passing seasons, and death—giving it its distinctive aesthetic appeal. The emotions it conveys are not excessive or dramatic but restrained, sincere, and quietly profound. "Aware" does not indicate sorrow in the narrow sense. As Motoori writes in *Isonokami no Sasamegoto*: "Sometimes we are delighted, sometimes we are sad, sometimes amused, sometimes in love, sometimes longing; whenever various emotions arise, we 'aware'" (Zhu, 2017). Thus, aware represents the full spectrum of emotional responsiveness. Its meaning surpasses mere sadness, signifying instead a heightened sensitivity to the emotional texture of life. *mono no aware* denotes a spiritual resonance with all things--a perception guided not by rational analysis but by affective intuition.

Beyond its literary origins, *mono no aware* intersects with several other Japanese aesthetic categories, forming a complex network of emotional, philosophical, and artistic values. Compared with *wabi-sabi*, which foregrounds rustic simplicity and the beauty of imperfection, *mono no aware* emphasizes emotional movement rather than material incompleteness. Where *wabi-sabi* is grounded in austerity and minimalism, *mono no aware* is grounded in tenderness and sensitivity. Similarly, *yūgen*, associated with subtlety, mystery, and the ineffable, privileges what lies beyond representation.*mono no aware*, by contrast, foregrounds the emotional immediacy of the ephemeral. Yet the categories often overlap; Japanese art frequently integrates all three. In *Kwaidan*, for instance, Kobayashi's visual compositions exhibit the quiet depth of *yūgen*, the melancholic impermanence of *mono no aware*, and the distilled simplicity

reminiscent of *wabi-sabi*. The film's slow pacing, atmospheric mise-en-scène, and symbolic landscapes extend these aesthetic legacies into the cinematic medium.

Thus, *mono no aware* is not a static concept but a dynamic, evolving sensibility rooted in religious belief, developed through literary practice, refined through philosophical inquiry, and ultimately manifested in artistic expression. It encapsulates a distinctive Japanese way of feeling and understanding the world, emphasizing the poignancy of transience and the emotional richness that arises from acknowledging it.

2. The Manifestation of *mono no aware* Aesthetics in the Film *Kwaidan*

Director Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan*, as a classic work of Japanese ghost-story cinema, profoundly interprets the spirit of *mono no aware* within traditional Japanese aesthetics through its distinctive audiovisual language and narrative elements, presenting a sorrowful yet beautiful vision of life's impermanence and emotional entanglement.

2.1 Seasonal Symbols and the Imagery of mono no aware

Japanese haiku, a poetic form that emerged during the Muromachi period, draws inspiration from seasonal transitions and natural phenomena, establishing the essential convention of incorporating *kigo* (seasonal words). Common seasonal elements include the climate and vegetation associated with each time of year. Haiku fuses beauty and emotion within concise, refined images, imbuing seasonal objects with human sentiment and human nature. The profound implications of these images correspond to the sensibility of "when the heart is moved, one comes to know *mono no aware*." The use of imagery to express the theme of *mono no aware* is also a common technique in Japanese cinema. Natural motifs such as "flowers, snow, and the moon" carry meanings that extend beyond their surfaces. Flowers blooming and falling symbolize the fleeting nature of beautiful moments; the incompleteness of the moon signifies a tragedy destined never to be whole. Pure natural elements contain the inward sorrow that lies beneath sensory experience, forming a stylized imagery of *mono no aware*.

Symbols such as winter, falling snow, and forests—deeply rooted in Japanese culture—embody the "fragility" and "collapse" associated with beauty. In the "Snow Woman" segment, the opening image of a snow-covered forest, the falling snowflakes, and the snowy cedars all convey a sense of compassion tinged with sorrow. This emotional tone, expressing the sadness and impermanence inherent in nature, precisely captures the essence of what the Japanese call the "beauty of *mono no aware*." Snow signifies purity, immaculate whiteness, and genuine emotion. In The Snow Woman, snow appears at both the beginning and end of the narrative, creating a mysterious, unreal temporality for the viewer. Its pristine whiteness projects an illusory beauty of emotion—hinting at the emotional spell Yuki casts over Minokichi, as well as Minokichi's longing for the ethereal beauty of the snow woman. Snow's other layer of meaning derives from the embodied sensations of "coldness" and "chill," foreshadowing the sorrowful ending. Minokichi fails to keep the Snow Woman's secret and discloses it to his wife, Yuki—unaware that Yuki is the Snow Woman herself. Enraged, she leaves behind her remorseful husband and their children. The inevitable melting of snow contains an inherent sorrow and desolation, reflecting the protagonist's inner emotional state and bringing him closest to the truth of life. In the "Hōichi the Earless" segment, the imagery of rain functions as a boundary between life and death, blurring the line between reality and illusion. Rain falling onto the ground transforms into mist, which mixes with natural elements to form a mysterious, hazy space. Rain and mist together construct the ethereal realm inhabited by the ghosts of the Heike warriors—echoing the aesthetic realm of *mono no aware*.

The forest, a frequent setting in the film, functions as both a physical and psychological landscape. In Japanese folklore, forests are liminal spaces where spirits dwell and where human emotions become externalized. In *Kwaidan*, the forest becomes a site of transformation: characters lose their bearings, confront the supernatural, or succumb to fate.The use of color further enhances the symbolic layer of *mono no aware*. Instead of naturalistic hues, Kobayashi employs bold, stylized backdrops—blood-red skies, icy blue snowscapes, deep indigo nights—to produce an uncanny unreality.These colors express emotional states—fear, longing, regret—more than geographical reality.

Ye Weiqu notes in *mono no aware* and *Yūgen* that "film manifests as humanized 'nature' and 'metaphor,' becoming a newly aestheticized 'living image reality' and cultural dwelling place." (Ye&Tang, 2002). *Kwaidan* presents natural objects in their most direct and symbolic form; their stylized imagery articulates the aesthetics of *mono no aware*, granting audiences a distinctive aesthetic experience.

2.2 The Construction of Space

Fujiwara no Mototoshi was the first to adapt the term yūgen from Chinese poetry and apply it to the critique of waka, linking yūgen closely to yojō (lingering emotion). Yojō, *mono no aware*, and "knowing *mono no aware*" share interrelated emotional structures. Modern Japanese aesthetician Tomonobu Imamichi describes yūgen as possessing a composite character: "As the ultimate expression of beauty, yūgen is fundamentally intertwined with elegance, lustrous charm, and tenderness, and undeniably carries within it the 'charm' of love." (Imamichi, 2014) In contrast, *mono no aware* is not the mystery itself but the emotional realization triggered by recognizing ephemerality, loss, and the transience of existence. Thus, rather than functioning as interchangeable terms, yūgen may be understood as the atmospheric condition that enables *mono no aware* to be felt. The emotion of *mono no aware* expresses the stirring of various inner feelings, with sorrow and compassion as its emotional foundation. Emotions resembling sympathy and pity serve as components of aware and as tonal elements in waka. Thus, for Fujiwara, "aware" constitutes an essential factor of yūgen.

A scene that typifies *mono no aware* aesthetics is the reconstructed ancient Japanese architectural space, both exterior and interior. In the "Black Hair" segment, the dilapidated, mold-stained courtyard conveys a subtle sense of decay, while the delicate arrangements within the interior hide the beauty of yūgen. The irregularly growing vegetation outside, together with the deteriorating corridor, creates a profound spatial depth. At the end of the segment, the samurai returns to his old home searching for his wife, walking slowly from the exterior courtyard into the interior space where her apparition appears. The dyed cloth, spinning wheel, and red partitions signify the boundary between the living and the dead and foreshadow the wife's spectral presence. Interior partitions—such as screens and curtains—divide space physically but acquire extended philosophical and aesthetic significance in the film.

In spaces used for religious rituals, such as shrines and temples, Zen aesthetics deeply influence the atmosphere. Places dedicated to deities must maintain solemn serenity. Upon entering the Buddhist gate, one must quiet the mind, comprehend the Way, and thus understand compassion. In Hōichi the Earless, the wooden temple interior exudes a pure, ascetic tranquility that reflects Japan's simple and restrained aesthetic. The courtyard contains nothing but a moss-covered stone; within this minimalist composition and expansive blankness, the viewer is given infinite space for contemplation. Stone and moss possess no life or death, no cycle; here, time seems suspended. Without worldly distraction, one returns to oneself, turning inward to sense the sorrow and loneliness inherent in life. Kobayashi's framing—often symmetrical and slow-moving—allows the viewer to experience the passage of time as a palpable force. This temporal sensitivity aligns with Japanese Zen philosophy and echoes Andrei

Tarkovsky's idea of *Sculpting in Time*, where cinema captures time's emotional imprint.In these yūgen spaces—particularly through silence and emptiness—the aesthetics of *mono no aware* arise naturally.The organic qualities of wood embody the Zen-like spirit of Japanese architectural tradition.

In *Kwaidan*, then, yūgen and *mono no aware* are not parallel effects but sequentially related. *Yūgen* functions as the aesthetic threshold—silent, veiled, and suggestive—while *mono no aware* emerges as the emotional response to what that obscurity reveals: impermanence, regret, and the transience of human experience.

2.3 The Subtle Resonance of Noh Performance

Noh, an art form combining music and dance, is a recurring aesthetic element associated with *mono no aware* in Japanese cinema. Its emotional force arises through slow, deliberate movement and ethereal vocalization. Noh-inspired musicality is frequently incorporated into Japanese film scores, imbuing them with the sensual beauty of *yūgen*. Influenced by the non-realist, emotion-centered, sensorial qualities of classical Japanese theatre, Noh relies heavily on metaphor and symbolism to guide the viewer's perception. Zeami's later theories on Noh performance emphasize that minimal movement creates the greatest imaginative space, pursuing harmony with nature and the stirring of inner emotion—precisely the emotional essence of *mono no aware*.(Wang, 2010) Movements should be more restrained than the emotion they express, rendering even the terrifying aspects of the ghost mask graceful and imbued with yūgen. Kobayashi uses the expressive mode of Noh to build the film's emotional and thematic core.

The ghosts in *Kwaidan* vividly embody Noh's yūgen-infused performance aesthetics. Unlike conventional frightening spirits, the film presents ghosts who are gentle, mournful, and sorrowfully elegant: the Snow Woman, whose body moves only through fluttering rags amid violent wind and snow; the puppet-like Heike warriors; the silent apparition in the teacup; and the wife-turned-skeleton lacking any trace of ferocity. Through minimalist presentation, the film conveys undercurrents of grief, eeriness, and unfulfilled longing.Emotional expressions—such as the samurai's joy upon reuniting with his wife, the remorseful gaze toward the departing Snow Woman, and the Heike clan's despair in their noble death—follow the principles of Noh performance: achieving maximal emotional effect with minimal technique. Composer Toru Takemitsu creates an ethereal soundscape using synthetic timbres to evoke coldness, depth, and mystery. In "Black Hair," the sudden crack of bamboo and the snapping of rotted wood express the sorrow and terror of the twisting black hair. In "The Snow Woman," shakuhachi tones and stones evoke the roar of wind and snow. In "Hōichi the Earless," the murmuring chants of Noh performers are transformed into the sound of the restless sea. In "In a Cup of Tea," the clash of swords merges with shamisen tones and shouted cries. Through sound design, the film lifts the viewer beyond concrete events, transcending fear to reach a philosophical contemplation of life's impermanence.

3. The Thematic Expression of *mono no aware*

In *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Ruth Benedict uses the chrysanthemum and the sword to describe Japan's distinct cultural character: the chrysanthemum symbolizes restraint, serenity, and sorrowful beauty, while the sword represents the Bushidō spirit and its deep reverence for death (Benedict, 2008). Japanese traditional aesthetics discovers aesthetic meaning within the process of dying; death is viewed as the transcendence of the soul toward eternity, carrying both the aura of sorrow and an extraordinary spiritual power. Death is an extreme manifestation of *mono no aware*. Within *mono no aware* aesthetics, death has become an aesthetic symbol. In filmic representation, the imagery and staging of death possess unique

visual styles and aesthetic attributes, and the stark contrast between death and beauty makes the expressive function of *mono no aware* particularly striking.

In "*Hōichi the Earless*," the solemn ritual in which the Heike warriors march toward death is depicted as both beautiful and sorrowful. Their loyalty, repaid with their lives, also becomes an embodiment of the beauty of death, conveying a serene and tranquil view of life and death. At times, death is assigned a meaning beyond the literal end of a person or thing—it conveys the regret and the fleeting quality of a beauty that vanishes in an instant. In "Black Hair," the samurai, unable to endure the arrogance of his new wife, returns to his old home and sees his former wife—her long black hair and youthful appearance unchanged. Yet the next morning, he awakens from his dream to find that the figure beside him is the long-dead wife's skeleton. The samurai crawls and struggles throughout the ruined house, only to suddenly take on a terrifying skeletal face himself, ultimately dying entangled by the long black hair into which his wife's resentment had transformed. The wife dies consumed by boundless longing and sorrow, her lingering resentment turning into black hair that returns to claim betrayal; the samurai's obsession with his wife becomes regret and remorse after her death. The black hair left behind by the dead wife becomes a symbol of beauty that exists only for a brief, vanishing moment—like cherry blossoms falling at their most beautiful.

Modern Japanese thinker Takahiro Sueki notes: "The central current of Japanese thought is respect for emotion" (Lei,2017). Thus, when Japanese people confront the impermanence of worldly affairs, of life, and of death, they respond with lamentation born of emotional immediacy—perceiving impermanence with body and mind, and exploring their inner spiritual path through the sadness that impermanence evokes. Impermanence (mujō) means that everything in existence undergoes cycles of emergence, transformation, development, and decay—the very core of the aesthetic meaning of *mono no aware*. At the beginning of "*The Snow Woman*," Minokichi witnesses the Snow Woman draw out Mosaku's soul; Mosaku's body is instantly covered in frost. His death amid the swirling snow points directly to the sorrow of life's ephemerality. Life's transience and grief form the core of *mono no aware*: in death, one perceives life's impermanence and spiritual transcendence. The thought of *mono no aware* seeks to understand the meaning of individual existence and the truth of life; film art makes the theme of "life and death bound by fate" even more vivid.

In "*Hōichi the Earless*," the fallen warriors cling to memories of the past, requesting Hōichi's nightly biwa performances; in "The Snow Woman," Minokichi offers his life as a promise to guard the secret, only to betray it in a moment of careless speech; in "Black Hair," the samurai betrays his wife's love and his own promise in pursuit of power, discarding his vow as if it were predetermined by fate. In "In a Cup of Tea," the samurai battles with the ghost in the bowl; in "The Snow Woman," Minokichi cannot hold on to his fleeting happiness with Yuki; in the Heike story, courage is futile as the once-glorious clan faces its inevitable ruin.

These themes reflect Buddhist mujō (impermanence): all beings, emotions, and experiences are transient. Kobayashi's ghosts are not malevolent but sorrowful—embodiments of unfinished emotions. The film ultimately illustrates how *mono no aware* frames death not as horror but as a moment of emotional revelation. Fear and beauty intertwine, inviting viewers to contemplate life's fragility. *Kwaidan* uses entanglements between humans and spirits to reflect human submission, helplessness, and resistance toward fate and death. Within the struggle between faith and betrayal, love and death, human life reveals its inherent impermanence, giving rise to the sorrowful and sublime aesthetic spirit of *mono no aware*.

4. Conclusions

mono no aware is an emotion that arises from an individual's experience of the myriad things in the world or from genuine, heartfelt encounters; it is the very source from which

Japanese traditional aesthetic forms have developed. *Kwaidan*, grounded in the aesthetics of *mono no aware*, conveys the distinctive understanding within Japanese traditional culture of life, death, and nature. Through the three dimensions of seasonal symbolism, yūgen spatial construction, and Noh performance, the film transforms Motoori Norinaga's notion of "knowing mono no aware" into a perceptible audiovisual language. Through stylized visuals, controlled pacing, and haunting soundscapes, the film cultivates an affective atmosphere where fear and beauty coexist. In confronting impermanence—of love, promises, and life itself—Kaidan enables viewers to feel the "heart of things" and "heart of events." Ultimately, the film reveals *mono no aware* not merely as an aesthetic style but as a cultural philosophy of emotional openness and existential reflection. Through the film's ethereal and sorrowful Japanese aesthetic, audiences experience a natural and deeply resonant emotional response.

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