

# The Aesthetic Characteristics of Emotional Abuse in The Japanese Movie “0.5mm”

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The Japanese movie “0.5mm” connects the life clips between the nursing-care helper Sawa and several old people in the form of a road movie, highlighting many thought-provoking social problems, and revealing how the elements of emotional abuse hidden between the old people and their relatives and friends affect people’s dignity and decency, and at the same time trying to offset the persecution from the emotional abuse with the warm kindness between the elderly and the care workers. The film’s implicit description of emotional abuse and explicit display of good deeds are blended in the quiet and mysterious narrative character, achieving the effect of synchronizing the artistic narrative rhythm with the flow of life, reflecting the unique aesthetic characteristics of Japanese films.

*Keywords:* “0.5mm”, emotional abuse, aesthetic characteristics

## Introduction

The 2014 film “0.5mm”, written and directed by Japanese female director Momoko Ando, uses a 198-minute long life flow to string together five story sections, and intensively presents many problems in contemporary Japanese society in the form of a road movie: the hospice care for the elderly, women’s survival dilemma, family ethics, dignity of life, spiritual distance, and even the normal sexual desires of older men, etc., making the film transcend gender perspectives, gain wider practical significance and win multiple awards. In the film’s original interpretation and fragmented narration of the lives of several elderly men, we get a glimpse of the ubiquitous emotional violence in life, the loneliness that is difficult to relieve in life, and the irreparable gaps between individuals. It is this lonely and cramped life state mixed with emotional violence that has become the deeper core of this film, which transcends social phenomena and obtains the ontological meaning of life.

The term “Emotional abuse” is a concept proposed by French clinical psychiatrist Marie-France Yrigoyan based on a large number of psychotherapy cases. “Emotional violence” means “mental abuse”, which does not require actual physical violence, but causes psychological trauma by belittling, humiliating, ridiculing, and ostracizing a specific target day after day (Hirigoyen, 2017, p. 6). Emotional abuse is a behavior that is currently recognized by society as causing psychological and mental harm to the person being done with the behavior. It does not present a violent external conflict, nor does it cause or may cause physical harm to people, therefore visually avoids bloody brutality. On the contrary, emotional abuse is mixed in the gray humorous narrative of

“0.5mm” in a subtle, metaphorical and ironic way, becoming a disharmonious black undercurrent in life, implying a certain psychological and spiritual gap in Japanese society and even human beings.

### **Implicit Characteristics of Emotional Abuse**

Emotional abuse shows different contents and metaphors in the five life sections of the film. It may lie between family affection and ethics, becoming an unbridgeable psychological gap; or it may wander between reality and history, becoming a life-long dark memory; or it can also confuse the boundaries between good and evil, making cold and violent moral judgments.

At the beginning of the film, fine daily details flow slowly: Sawa’s skilled and attentive care, and the humble and courteous words and deeds of Shozo’s daughter Yukiko, everything seemed harmonious and beautiful. However, with Yukiko’s merciless request, the subsequent fire, and Yukiko’s hanging, etc., the film broke through the soft whispers on the surface of the Shozo family with great density and tension, and the audience was caught off guard by the emotionally abusive secret of the incest between Shozo and his daughter. This sexual emotional violence is essentially a demonstration of the absolute power of patriarchy. Marie-France Yrigoyan believes that the essence of emotional abuse is the display of power. “As long as there is a difference in power, emotional abuse may occur” (Hirigoyen, 2017, p. 9). In the family order, patriarchy and male authority are highly unified. By virtue of power differences, it has the authority to inflict violence on other family members at will, and even breaks through ethical principles and directly displays naked sexual bullying. Yukiko’s red-stained white dress and the mute Makoto are two meaningful metaphors for this incestuous emotional abuse. On the one hand, red is a metaphor for violation and blood, which is a perverted manifestation of the supposedly pure father-daughter relationship in sexual violence; on the other hand, Makoto is a deformed product of the incest and emotional violence. In order to protect Makoto, Yukiko cut off Makoto’s long hair and raised her as a boy, which caused Makoto to gradually develop obstacles to her gender identity. At the same time, Makoto was confused about whether the abuser Shozo was his grandfather in the ethical sense or his father in the blood relationship. In a sense, words are a tool for self-certification and identification. Because of the double barrier of gender self-certification and identity recognition, words lost the need for expression and directly led to Makoto’s aphasia. At the end of the film, the speechless Makoto screamed for her mother at the top of her lungs. The words pointed to the only clear mother’s identity. The father’s role was hidden in the power of words, which seemed to be a metaphor for the moral praise and blame of the perpetrator of this family ethics emotional abuse being postponed indefinitely. The film is about showing, not judging.

The elements of emotional abuse in the life segments of Yasuo and Amao show the alienation, covetousness and deception of relatives and friends, showing the reality of how the interest relationship between family, friendship and money destroys harmonious interpersonal relationships. Yasuo’s trip was undoubtedly tragic. He ran away from home with an oxygen tube inserted into his nostrils, dragging his luggage. He said to Sawa angrily: “I want to spend all my property, and my son and daughter-in-law will only care about my money.” He even went to the karaoke room and sang songs without feeling, comforting his loneliness with a few hours of excitement. Amao’s loneliness was even more desperate. He counted the only four trees in the park, talked affectionately with bicycles on the roadside, and enjoyed the joy of stealing bicycles and puncturing tires. He would rather be deceived by his “good friend” Saito to cherish the illusion of being “respected”. In the end, he spent the rest of his

life in a nursing home with the 10 million he saved from working as an auto mechanic. Whether it is the angry Yasuo or the self-deceived Amao, they are all trying to avoid the emotional abuse inflicted on them by their relatives or friends. The film does not directly show emotional abuse, but demonstrates the existence and extent of emotional abuse through the absurd actions of the characters. Here, money and property have become the targets coveted by the perpetrators. Emotional abuse appears in a more secretive way among relatives and friends. It is called in the name of family affection and friendship, but it destroys the emotional connection between relatives and the normal and healthy interpersonal relationships. The physical distance of 0.5 millimeters eventually becomes a shocking psychological gap between relatives and friends under the interference of emotional abuse.

Director Momoko Ando uses a unique female perspective to make war elements present the characteristics of calm and cold emotional abuse. The film uses an oral description of the war to avoid any positive representation of the war between Japan and the United States. The retired professor Yoshio’s 7-minute memory of the war: “There is nothing more stupid than war. It is a miracle to be alive now. The dead are so pitiful... Why are we fighting? People are so pitiful...”. This recurring line made the audience marvel at the director’s ingenious use of film language: using disordered and repetitive words to directly reach the essence of the content, and revealing the anti-human truth of war in the form of disordered logic. On the one hand, the history of the war is still Yoshio’s vivid memory, and the whispers are the state of discourse of Yoshio who is becoming increasingly demented. The narration of war memories in whispers presents some kind of daily reality for the elderly Yoshio. On the other hand, the essence of the whispers is to recognize the equality of life. It transcends the narrow concept of family and country, and denies the justice and legality of war from the perspective of life. As a result, the history of war has been accumulated in a cold and violent way into the collective memory of a generation or even the entire Japanese nation, allowing a demented old man to still remember clearly and feel guilty.

However, we must not ignore the key figure of the nurse, Sawa. She is the “flaneur wandering the city streets” described by Baudelaire (Baudelaire, 1989, p. 6), observing aimlessly and then waiting for evaluation. Her experience and perception are also empirical. Sawa’s participation weakens the meaning of her role. More often, she only serves as the audience’s “eyes” instrumentally, but she unconsciously exposes the bard’s aloof romance. The abstract loneliness is embodied in Sawa’s successful “capture” of each old man. Each “capture” uses threats and deception. She deceived the karaoke shop owner that she came with Yasuo together, threatened Amao that she would call police for his puncturing bicycle tires, and threatened Yoshio who secretly hid a vulgar painting book in the mall to spread the word, etc. Although the setting of the plot is slightly similar, it cleverly injects elements of emotional abuse between Sawa and others, allowing the two weak people to deal with each other in false threats and willingness to be threatened. Threats and deception have always been an effective way for Sawa to graft herself into the lives of others, and they are also a good way for her to save herself. It reduces the perfection of human kindness to a certain extent, allowing the individual to present a richer and more realistic face of human nature in specific life scenes.

Emotional abuse is represented in a sideways and covert way in these five life scenes. Therefore, it is often not easy to detect when watching the movie. However, the indirect and hidden harm caused by emotional abuse to the victims is obvious. “Emotional abuse causes victims to suffer great mental trauma and great insult to their personal dignity, causing many victims to suffer long-term pain. Some even lose the courage to survive and go to

a dead end.”<sup>1</sup> If emotional abuse is a certain manifestation of the evil of human nature, then when the movie answers the social harm of emotional abuse, it dispels it to a certain extent from the perspective of the goodness of human nature, highlighting the rich and complex nature of human nature from both the good and evil aspects.

### **Explicit Narratives of Anti-violence**

The audience can easily capture many warm moments in the film’s fragmented life narrative, and be moved by these warm moments while ignoring the disharmony of emotional abuse. That is what makes this film great. On the one hand, it does not avoid the gaps left by emotional abuse on people’s minds and bodies. On the other hand, it puts a warm band-aid on the gaps, as if to comfort and transcend. This kind of warmth is reflected in some kind hearts and behaviors of the characters, which makes emotional abuse appear gentle and forgivable.

Sawa’s loneliness is impressive from the beginning of the movie. The film conceals her family background and interpersonal relationships, and isolates them in the life fragments of one elderly person after another, hungry for spiritual nourishment of love and respect in the daily life of caring for the elderly. The 1,000 yen in Yasuo’s hand before leaving, the coat he took off, and Sawa’s promise to take care of him in his final days filled the lonely, helpless and thinly clothed Sawa’s desire for love, and also temporarily resisted the objective facts of coldness between Yasuo’s family members. After Amao settled down in the nursing home for the rest of his life, he gave the car to Sawa. At the end of the film, Sawa found the 5 million yen left by Amao in the trunk of the car. This kind of magnified kindness provides a way to resolve the emotional abuse in family relationships that Amao encountered. If Yasuo and Amao gave Sawa a material comfort, then Yoshio gave Sawa some kind of spiritual salvation. The lonely Yoshio integrated his thoughts about Japanese society, human nature and interpersonal relationships into the tape. In an intellectual way, he left a precious spiritual legacy to the equally lonely Sawa, inspiring her to rush to every scene of life, continue to bravely search for the meaning of life.

Sawa treats every old man who she successfully “captured” with kindness, making all kinds of survival emotional abuse appear gentle in a more powerful way. On the one hand, she takes care of the old man’s daily life skillfully and carefully, and on the other hand, she cares for the old man’s heart in a unique and domineering way. Yasuo’s embarrassment inspired Sawa’s chivalrous quality of saving others from danger. This kindness and “hijacking” behavior produced a strong contrast and brought a sense of comedy, which partially offset the harm of interpersonal emotional abuse encountered by a lonely soul. This chivalrous character is more vividly interpreted in the plot of Amao being defrauded of investment. Afraid that Amao would be defrauded of his life savings, Sawa learned the truth by following, peeping, and eavesdropping, and then decided to call to see through the scam. Sawa’s slightly exaggerated domineering and tough performance, and Amao’s scene of grabbing the phone like a child and sobbing softly, constitute an obvious contrast between strength and weakness. The arrogance in Sawa’s behavior reflects the kindness in her heart. It soothes Amao’s loneliness and desire to be respected, and also counteracts the trampling of trust and respect caused by interpersonal emotional abuse. Yoshio, who secretly keeps books about girls in sailor uniforms, secretly hides his sexual desires in good manner and education. Sawa uses her simple promise to relieve Yoshio’s embarrassment and fulfill the self-esteem and dignity of an old professor. All the kind deeds, such as carefully preparing various dishes, patiently pickling dried

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<sup>1</sup> The social harm of emotional abuse. [DB/OL]<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E5%86%B7%E6%9A%B4%E5%8A%9B/15401>

fish, clean and tidy clothes, taking good care of the professor’s wife, etc., warmed the aging Yoshio, soothed an old man’s normal desire for sex, and comforted the trauma of war accumulated into the emotional abuse element of memory.

Of course, the film avoids appearing to be morally perfect humanity when showing all kinds of goodness. It incorporates a little care and helplessness into the kindness and good deeds performed by each character, making the character’s specific behavioral qualities more in line with human logic, and the character image more vivid and concrete, closer to the reality of life. For example, Yasuo and Amao’s generosity to Sawa was a helpless choice they made after being disappointed in life and family relationships. This avoids abstracting the characters’ moral qualities and allows them to naturally follow the logic of life. It is normal human nature to be stingy with money at first, but later giving generously is also a reasonable decision of human nature in certain life situations. Human nature wanders in the logic of life, making the choice between good and evil. Sawa’s little hidden agenda has always accompanied her various good deeds, making every kindness seem less pure. Her threats and coercion towards every elderly person, and her “vicious” kindness in daily life are all based on some small calculation, weighing the pros and cons for her own survival. This is another success of the film: Each life section and the characters wandering in the section develop naturally according to the principles of life and the logic of human nature. There are moments of unbearability and vulgarity, and moments of nobility and selflessness, showing the complex and rich reality of human nature.

Kindness and good deeds are part of life and humanity. The film uses explicit narrative to relieve the pain or discomfort caused by emotional abuse to a certain extent, but it does not perfect kindness, let alone oppose good and evil in human nature. We can both accept the flaws of human nature exposed by emotional abuse, and we also believe that kindness can provide some degree of redemption. Of course, when watching the movie, the reason why we did not feel the obvious game between the two forces of good and evil largely depends on the movie’s original narrative that is close to real life and its quiet and distant artistic pursuit.

### **The Aesthetic Characteristics Of Quietness And Mystery**

The implicit treatment of emotional abuse elements prevents the film from showing direct despair. The explicit narratives of good deeds avoid the falsehood of perfect human nature. The implicit and explicit scenes are perfectly blended into the film’s quiet and mysterious narrative character.

The film presents the characteristics of a “life flow” film, which “advocates directly recording the life facts and events that fall into the field of view of the movie camera, without making selections or evaluations” (Xu, 1986, p. 71). “0.5mm” adopts the daily narrative method of the original life flow, and tells the several stages of life closest to death at a pace that is synchronized with life. On the one hand, the film uses film and television elements such as still images and empty shots to show a certain reality of life and the true nature of the soul. Japanese film theorist Sho Iwasaki once talked about the unique style of Japanese films in the preface of his “History of Japanese Films”: “The composition of Japanese film pictures is still, and they are very careful to avoid the dangerous feeling of moving even if it feels like it will collapse if it stays still for one second. This still picture seems to last for a thousand years. It shows the neat and well-proportioned beauty, but also lurks a psychology of inaction and contemplation” (Iwasaki, 1981, p. 93). This kind of scene that seems to have been frozen for thousands of years most clearly appears in the snippets of Yoshio’s life: He is sitting under the eaves

guarding the marinated fish that Sawa made to prevent cats from eating it. Art time is almost equal to real time, long, still and stable. In the stage of life where Yoshio is closest to dementia and death, this seemingly meaningless silence can be described as a moment of spiritual freedom for him, or it can be a repetition of countless lonely moments in his life, or it may be life itself sitting around without any purpose. The still picture transcends the plot told in the film, and the audience is even willing to sit back and watch the fish and catch the cat with Yoshio, forgetting the continuity before and after the plot of the film. This kind of “non-utilitarian” narrative rhythm and “no expectation” viewing psychology give the film a mysterious psychological care and aesthetic significance.

On the other hand, the film also uses panoramic shots to hint at the loneliness of the individual soul and the absurdity of the behavior. Use a high-hanging overhead shot to simulate a God’s perspective to show a panoramic living environment: In the still life scene, only Amao muttered and counted the four trees that he could not finish counting. The environment was remote, quiet and lacking in life, while Amao, who is alive, repeats meaningless actions, and the two form a conflict in the overhead shot. But this conflict is not passionate, it just quietly arouses the viewer’s awareness, making people feel Amao’s profound loneliness, understand the pleasure brought by his little pranks, and at the same time calmly and slowly follow the narrative rhythm, feel the quiet and gentle artistic style of this film, and appreciate its remote and mysterious aesthetic characteristics.

The transitions between each segment of the movie are like turning pages when reading a novel, silent and unprepared. Without coherent transitions between shots, how can we achieve the smoothness of the linear structure and the anticipation of watching the movie from beginning to end? This benefits from the film’s pursuit of structural self-sufficiency that echoes from beginning to end, and cleverly sets up several ups and downs of plots. At the beginning of the movie, a series of warm and slow details of life are presented, and in a flash, the thrilling stories of sleeping together, fires, and suicides are all thrown to the audience, which catches people off guard. While the audience is still surprised by this extreme treatment, the film switches to a leisurely and humorous narrative tone, making the life segments of Yasuo, Amao and Yoshio show the characteristics of light comedy and dry humor. These three life fragments are used to superimpose a joyful atmosphere and become the main narrative tone of the film. It is gentle and soothing, with a little helplessness and sadness in the joy. The Makoto fragment as the ending of the story is cleverly related to the first fragment, forming a self-contained structure that echoes the beginning and end, completes a coherent linear narrative function, and satisfies the audience’s expectations. The narrative style is also bland and gentle, ultimately presenting the overall quiet and gentle aesthetic style of the film.

If the plot of the movie is a maze, Sawa is the entrance to the maze. She acts as the camera in the movie, collecting the most complex and pure feelings, and connects five life scenes in a wandering way of survival, forming the structural characteristics of the candied haws on a stick. Sawa’s parasitic survival instinct and hunting lifestyle are the main thread of the story. Each life scene she wanders is independent of each other, and together they accumulate into Sawa’s life mark. In that sense, these five fragments become a whole. They are all the content of Sawa’s life, thus forming some kind of internal unity. That is the real reason why the audience can endure and watch how life slowly flows around them and in front of them, because it has a certain isomorphism with everyone’s life, observing oneself in others, seeing the reconciliation between emotional abuse and kindness

in the distant and gentle narrative tone, understanding the contradiction between aging and rebirth, and comprehending that love and understanding are the fillers of 0.5mm psychological distance.

### Conclusion

Based on the alarming social problems of the elderly, the director starts from the subtleties of human nature. She not only sees that interpersonal relationships are full of elements of emotional abuse, but also firmly believes that the kindness of the heart can redeem the subtle 0.5 mm psychological distance between people.

As Yoshio said in the film: “Although the distance between each person’s heart may be only 0.5 millimeters, when these millimeters gather and move together in the same direction, it becomes the beginning of a revolution.” The narrative style of life-flow movies and the quiet and distant artistic style are the unique features of its film aesthetics. This is a film that requires patience, patience in filming, patience in acting, and patience in watching it. Only with patience can you observe the warmth and warmth of the human world in the details, play the good and evil of people in the details, and understand the countless 0.5 millimeter things in life. The huge and the tiny.

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