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"The Aware of Boxing": Subject Reconstruction, Genre Variation, and Cultural Representation of Boxing Films in Japan

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Abstract. Japanese boxing films focus on marginalized groups such as hikikomori, ethnic minorities, and the deaf-mute, transforming boxing from a tool for external gain into a "language" to communicate with the world. They respond to identity anxiety in modern society and accomplish subject reconstruction. By breaking the narrative paradigm of the "hero's journey" and expressing the traditional "mono no aware" aesthetics, these films demonstrate the plot tension of ordinary people "burning out their lives," completing the genre variation of "the aware of ordinary mortals." Cultural representation is reflected in three aspects: the genre variation as a cultural resistance against capital-driven "winner economy" and meritocracy; the expression of Japanese traditional aesthetics through defeat or "de-competition"; and the philosophical elaboration of "the human condition" and "human emancipation" through boxing as an act.

Keywords: boxing films, Japanese cinema, film genre, mono no aware, existentialism

1. Introduction

From the 21-second silent short film Men Boxing (1891) produced and directed by William Kennedy Dickson and William Heise for Edison Manufacturing Company, to the global cultural phenomenon Rocky (1976), from Raging Bull (1980) in the New Hollywood era to the classic revival Million Dollar Baby (2004), boxing films, as a subgenre of sports cinema, have evolved alongside the history of film and flourished cross-culturally in Japan. According to statistics from List of Japanese Sports Films covering sports films from 1923 to 2018, 93 Japanese boxing films can be identified, accounting for 17.2% of the total 541 sports films and ranking first among all sports film genres in Japan [1]. In recent years, outstanding boxing films such as 100 Yen Love (百円の恋,2016), Ah, Wilderness: Part 1 (あゝ,荒野 前篇,2017), and Keiko, Meantime (ケイコ 目を澄ませて,2022) have appeared on the top ten lists of Japan's Kinema Junpo and at the Japan Academy Film Prize. However, their narrative strategies and social perspectives differ from those of classic American inspirational boxing films: the protagonists are usually ordinary people rather than professional boxers; boxing does not bring them fame, money, or love; and the final matches often end in defeat or are irrelevant to victory. Filmmakers "attempt to respond to fundamental questions

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about boxing, such as what boxing is and what it means for life, from a deeper dimension" [2], regarding boxing as a language to dialogue with life rather than a tool to change it. The adaptation of 100 Yen Love into Hot Blooded (2024) grossed 3.417 billion yuan in mainland China, a phenomenon that may suggest that the narrative turn and localization methods of Japanese boxing films can provide references for the creation and genre construction of domestic sports films.

2. Subject reconstruction: from "laurel boxer successism" to "marginal group failure tribute"

In 1885, a bronze sculpture completed between 330 BCE and 50 BCE was unearthed in Rome—The Boxer at Rest. It depicts a defeated boxer with a broken nose and teeth, blood streaming from wounds on his forehead and cheeks. "This Hellenistic sculptor evokes the audience's compassion for the once heroic but now severely injured warrior through emotion rather than reason" [3]. The sculpture embodies the character's story and temporality through scars; its creator focused not on a victorious athlete wearing a laurel wreath, but on a frustrated man sitting on the edge of the ring. More than 2,000 years later and across the ocean, Japanese films similarly focus on losers in the boxing ring. Unlike American boxing films that center on down-and-out boxers or professional champions, Japanese works often set their protagonists as more marginalized groups to highlight the era-specific, social, and national identity anxiety and subject crisis.

The term "marginal person" inherently carries an othering perspective: they can neither integrate into mainstream communities nor fulfill their self-ideals, thus lingering in the gap between the mainstream and the ideal self. In 100 Yen Love, it is Ichiko, an unemployed and decadent woman; in Ah, Wilderness (あゝ,荒野), it is Shinji, a gang youth, and Kenji, a stuttering Korean-Japanese man; in Keiko, Meantime, it is Keiko, a deaf-mute boxing girl; and in Blue (ブルー,2021), it is Narazaki, a game arcade employee. The films do not provide a path for the protagonists to move closer to the mainstream; instead, they invoke their subjectivity through "the act of challenging itself" rather than "challenging something" in an existentialist manner. The films emphasize Hannah Arendt's concept of "the plurality of humans" and a dynamic understanding of human nature as non-static. As director Sho Miyauchi stated: "My job is to explore the real individual that Keiko is with Kishii and others—regardless of her gender, her identity as a deaf-mute boxer, or even abandoning such prejudices or labels, focusing solely on her as a person" [4]. Thus, the subject reconstructed through challenge is not a boxer recognized by others, but an ordinary person who discovers their inner self.

The process of subject construction is not a linear path of "marginal person—boxer (subject)" but a three-part structure: "marginal person—boxer—subject." The final self-subject is neither the original depressed identity nor the glamorous professional boxer in others' eyes, but a dynamic self-aware of its own possibilities through negation. "The negativity of the other gives the same its contour and measure" [5]. In other words, as a language of communication between two parties in the ring, confrontation signifies intersubjective dialogue. In this violent and direct dialectical field (where both parties shape themselves by negating the other, and similarly shape themselves by being negated), the intellectual and physical game of mutual offense and defense, as a form of discourse, confirms the boxer's subjective position.

2.1. Self-construction in the presence of the other

Ichiko in 100 Yen Love exhibits typical characteristics of the "satori generation": lack of desire, avoidance of failure, and reluctance to interact with incompatible people. Born between 1983 and 1994, this generation grew up after the collapse of the bubble economy and is accustomed to avoiding unnecessary efforts and conflicts, believing that "there is not much difference in life

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whether one makes a little more effort or lives a comfortable and leisurely life" [6]. The pressure Ichiko faces from her family essentially stems from a meritocratic society, and her conflict with her sister arises from economic deprivation due to unemployment—economic scarcity implies the loss of identity. Scholar Hiroyuki Hayashi argues that the lifestyle of the satori generation originates from "a desire not to fail" [7], while Ichiko's most touching line to the audience is "I really want to win once" at the end. The "low-desire society" arises from people's suppression of desires to minimize anxiety about the future. The emergence of desire from "not wanting to fail" to "really wanting to win" reflects the director's certain awareness of Hannah Arendt's ideas: modern society is seen as a labor society where humans are reduced to "laboring" animals, and only "action" can trigger the transformative process of "vita activa" (active life). Action makes humans pioneers while confirming their uniqueness. Previously, Ichiko always played boxing video games with her nephew, but video games were then a virtual space for her to escape action and speech. In contrast, the physical confrontation brought by boxing allowed her to embody and perceive the real world and herself. Stepping onto the ring meant accepting the negativity of the other and beginning the construction of her self-subject.

2.2. Postcolonial identity search

Compared to Ichiko's era-specific youth characteristics in Japanese society, an even more marginalized character is Kenji in Ah, Wilderness. His Korean-Japanese identity carries muteness in Japan and the absence of a father. Director Nagisa Oshima's films Sing A Song of Sex (1967) and Death by Hanging (絞死刑,1968) propose the view that "Korea and Japan are regarded as equal countries and nations" [8]. In Ah, Wilderness, which continues this perspective, the metaphorical absence of the father's nationality and country symbolizes a subject collapse in a postcolonial context. As a "cultural mixed-blood," Kenji should have two first languages—Japanese and Korean—but his father, who could have protected him in childhood, was never present. The father who constantly drank and beat the young Kenji was a true absence of a "father." Thus, fatherless Kenji was caught between the two cultural spaces of "Japan/Korea" and excluded by both "father/society." Boxing replaced the two lacking first languages (Japanese and Korean) as his "third language" to communicate with the world, and the ring became a dialogue field for him to reclaim his subjectivity. His death in the ring ultimately gave him certainty, in line with Sartre's existentialist philosophy: "Only death can finalize me" [9]. Due to the relativity and fluidity of center and margin, the other protagonist Shinji and Kenji form a semantic field of "margin of the center/center of the margin." The final match results in the "center of the margin" perishing at the hands of the "margin of the center," but this perishing itself strengthens Kenji's identity certainty: through the ring, he found his language—he is both Japanese and Korean, yet neither Japanese nor Korean. Boxing regranted him his identity, and dying in the ring confirmed his identity as a boxer, thus completing the confirmation of his subjectivity.

2.3. The truth of intersubjective life

Director Sho Miyauchi's Keiko, Meantime adopts an "everyday life aesthetics" approach to de-label and remove the so-called marginalized identity from Keiko. At the end, instead of elevating Keiko to a pedestal through an inspirational narrative of a disabled person winning the competition, the film shows her resting by the river and realizing that the opponent who defeated her is just a manual laborer at a construction site. While leading the audience to "disenchant" the boxing myth, the director also breaks the myth or fairy-tale narrative paradigm of disabled characters in commercial

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genre films (such as Forrest Gump (1994)). In addition, the film focuses on Keiko's dual action spaces of "cleaning/boxing." In the shots, her cleaning process in hotel rooms and her training in the boxing gym share a similar state of concentration; thus, both spaces carry the trivial moments of her life, without distinction. The director abandons the "training montage" commonly used in boxing films, which intercuts passionate music with training clips, making the climactic final match more like "an extension of her daily life trajectory rather than a special moment disconnected from daily life" [10]. If the audience still held a glimmer of expectation for the marginalized person's inspiration or sighed at her unwillingness to fail before the end, the ending truly returns to the subjective recognition of Keiko as an ordinary person rather than a marginalized one. The complete form and process of Keiko's existence as a subject not only suggest a Sisyphus-like truth of life but also break the subject-object dualism of "protagonist—opponent." Keiko's chance encounter with her opponent by the river reminds the audience that the world is an intersubjective network of relationships, and the persistence of the other is the premise for the self not to perish.

3. Genre variation: from "public myth" to "the aware of ordinary mortals"

3.1. Narrative paradigm of mono no aware aesthetics

"A film genre is both a static and a dynamic system: on the one hand, it is a familiar formula related to narrative and filmic elements... On the other hand, changes in cultural attitudes, new influential genre films, industrial economic conditions, etc., continuously modify any film genre" [11]. In other words, genres not only present different structural forms diachronically with historical development but also evolve synchronically due to factors such as regional culture, economic conditions, and social concepts. American boxing films since the 21st century, such as Southpaw (2015), Warrior (2011), and Cinderella Man (2005), usually adopt Rocky's structure as their narrative paradigm: a down-and-out boxer—finding a goal to strive for (such as love)—meeting a life mentor—the process of hard work—finally gaining external benefits such as victory, love, family, money, or fame. In 1976, the United States was experiencing public distrust of the government caused by the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War, and the "American Dream" was crumbling. The success of Rocky and Sylvester Stallone himself brought upward hope to the public. Thus, Rocky not only became a narrative template for boxing films but also conversely endowed boxing films with the label of "inspirational" or "passionate." If "Rocky" became an "epic hero" who inspired public spirit, then Rocky is a boxing film rooted in the historical context of the United States, which continues to the Creed series starting in 2015.

Japanese director Takeshi Kitano's film Kids Return (キッズ・リターン,1996) broke the inspirational narrative of "grassroots boxers changing their life trajectories through boxing practice," which meant the separation of the boxing myth from the personal growth narrative. Pony, who gave up boxing, joined a gang hoping to become a leader, while Shinji, who persisted in boxing, dreamed of becoming a champion, but neither succeeded. Boxing, which was originally an upward ladder for changing the characters' fates, became a cold driver for them to experience the truth of reality. This turn not only broke away from rigid screenwriting models but also reconstructed the narrative rules of boxing films. However, the tragic aesthetics of Japanese boxing narratives did not originate from films but from the best-selling post-WWII manga Ashita no Joe (あしたのジョー). The Japanese Red Army's "Yodo-go Hijacking Incident" occurred during its serialization from 1968 to 1973, and the hijackers issued a statement saying "We are Ashita no Joe." It can be seen that the ending of Joe Yabuki—"burning out to ashes," smiling and dying while sitting in the corner of the ring, and being judged defeated—has transcended the boxing narrative. Although the story's development still

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conforms to the mythic structure of the "hero's journey" and both Ashita no Joe and Rocky end with the protagonist's defeat, their emotional handling differs: Rocky achieved success by "losing the match but winning honor," while Ashita no Joe uses the frozen frame of the protagonist sitting pale in the corner of the ring as a psychological space to accommodate the audience's sighs and melancholy. Joe Yabuki's brilliant yet short "burning" process from a street gangster to the center of the ring is highly characteristic of Japan's "mono no aware" aesthetics, a feature that continues in Kids Return and subsequent works.

The "anti-boxing" turn of Japanese boxing films lies in their traditional aesthetic concept of "mono no aware." The narrative of 100 Yen Love is divided into four parts: 1. The protagonist Ichiko idles away her days in decadence; 2. She conflicts with her family and starts working alone; 3. Influenced by boxer Kano, she trains hard and gains confidence; 4. She lands a beautiful punch in the match but ultimately loses. The first three-quarters of its narrative structure is basically similar to Rocky-style boxing films, but the last part is more realistic, and it is this realistic turn that reflects the "passionate/dejected" duality of Japanese boxing narratives. Similarly, Ah, Wilderness, adapted from the novel by Japanese poet and director Shuji Terayama, tells the friendship between Shinji, who was released from a juvenile detention center, and Kenji, a stuttering Korean-Japanese youth, as well as their "cruel youth story" after becoming boxers. Both gained identity recognition and social courage through boxing training and ring matches, and finally met in the ring, where Kenji, who fought with all his strength, died. Their journey from the extreme margins to the "center of the margin" and their dissipation at the most brilliant moment embody Japan's "aware" culture. In Japanese, "aware" (あ わ れ) "corresponds to the Chinese character 'you' (gentle), expressing a positive meaning; it also corresponds to the Chinese character 'ai' (sorrow), expressing a negative meaning" [12]. Its intuitive feeling containing both "admiration" and "lament" is integrated with Japanese boxing stories, thus forming the narrative paradigm of "the aware of ordinary mortals."

3.2. Key conflict of subject deficiency

The core conflict of Japanese boxing films is not the contradiction between the protagonist and the external environment, but the deficiency of subjectivity. American film theorist Leger Grindon proposed six key conflicts in boxing films, which can be summarized as six pairs of contradictions: "material and spirit," "interest and morality," "combat and love," "margin and mainstream," "injustice and resistance," and "detachment and chivalry" [13]. It can be seen that they are always contradictions between personal pursuit and external conditions. Japanese boxing films do not care about the wealth that boxing brings to individuals, nor do they depict frictions between commercial operations and personal values, nor do they tell stories of winning love after match victories. Although they portray marginalized groups, they do not aim to integrate into the mainstream, nor do they simply point to social injustice, and naturally do not romanticize individual heroism of opposing social will. Compared to the plot framework of "boxing for some other purpose," Japanese boxing films "take boxing as a method and boxing itself as the purpose," and personal self-identity emerges naturally.

Boxing is not a tool to obtain other benefits, but a language to communicate with others and an integral part of embodying and understanding the world. In Ah, Wilderness, besides the mute Kenji, Shinji lost both parents in childhood, and his best friend Yamada killed Liu Hui, whom he regarded as an elder brother. Thus, the father figure constantly appeared and then disappeared in his growth process, making his self-construction process vague and unstable. Kenji and Shinji form a mirror image in terms of the absence of a father. The polyphony formed by the anti-suicide festival against the background of the Great East Japan Earthquake and nuclear leakage, and the triple storylines of

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the two male protagonists, indicate the widespread survival anxiety in Japanese society where the younger generation cannot be provided with a safe environment. In other words, contemporary Japanese society is to Japanese youth what the fathers of the two male protagonists are to them—an absent presence. The path of boxing became a way for them to shape their inner self and integrate their roles. Thus, the shift in focus from "victory and defeat" to "confrontation" is a cognitive upgrade that breaks the single subject. The setting of multiple protagonists presents the truth of the world as a network of subjects through multi-perspective image presentation. Underdog (アンダードッグ,2020), Ah, Wilderness (with two male protagonists confronting each other in the ring), and Keiko, Meantime (where the protagonist meets her opponent outside the ring) all set the subject construction model as a realistic restoration from "subject-object opposition" to "intersubjective coexistence."

4. Cultural representation: from "winner economy" to "praise for all beings"

4.1. Traditional aesthetics and cultural persistence

All sports films have the visual characteristic of embodied expression, while boxing films are not only physical and mental depictions of sweat and exhaustion but also spiritual writings of blood and wounds. If winning at the cost of a swollen face is still worthwhile, then a defeat marked by countless scars and fighting to the death challenges the economic value orientation of "effort—reward." Champion narratives obviously carry the market logic of "winner economy" and interest supremacy, while the loser's perspective, with humanistic care, not only pays attention to the deep psychological crisis of contemporary youth but also reflects the filmmakers' profound concern for the human condition.

If "public myth" is a capitalist market logic of "creating gods," then "the aware of ordinary mortals" is a humanistic cultural resistance. The development of modern boxing is largely due to the market operation of capital, so as a commercialized and systematic sport, it can form a mature industrial chain. The five-dimensional structure of "Olympic events—commercial competitions—film genres—political penetration—public life" originates from the worship and promotion of individual heroism. For example, Muhammad Ali, a boxing legend and anti-war activist, transformed from a boxer to a democratic fighter and became a public myth. Biopics and documentaries about him have continued to be produced from the late 20th century to 2019. A "champion industrial chain" has been formed between boxing and boxing films: sports fans eagerly anticipate who will win the gold belt in the arena and in front of TV screens, while audiences in front of the silver screen look forward to how the protagonist will pick themselves up and win glory again. Its industrial logic means "victory as a capital driver," promoting the operation of the five dimensions from sports to public life. At the same time, the creative connection between Muhammad Ali and the Rocky script points to the historical and cultural soil of American "pioneers" and the "American Dream." The historical background of the United States at that time allowed the real black boxer Muhammad Ali and the fictional underdog character Rocky to provide dual inspiration to both the U.S. government and the American public amid the tense relationship between them: "As long as you work unremittingly, you can achieve an ideal life." This was undoubtedly incorporated into commercial value—for Ali, it was the broadcast rate and odds of boxing matches; for Stallone, it was the box office reserves for the five Rocky sequels and the Rambo series. However, in contrast, Japan, a boxing power that has 2 seats in the world's top 10 active P4P boxers and has produced 110 world champions, has not used its vast boxing market as a creative resource for boxing films. Instead, it has turned to narrating the failures of ordinary people.

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Obviously, this narrative tendency is not only a breakthrough in genre rigidity but also a resistance against capital hegemony.

"Defeat" is not just the opposite of victory, but a dissolution of success and meritocracy. Throughout the history of Japanese boxing films, Season of the Sun (太陽の季節,1956), a representative work of the "Taiyo-zoku" (Sun Tribe) films depicting the dissolute lives of teenagers from wealthy families, did not take boxing as the main narrative field or plot driver. Boxing did not represent an upward ladder to success, and Kids Return can be said to be its echo 40 years later. Director Shuji Terayama's The Boxer (ボクサー,1977) and Junji Sakamoto's feature debut Don't Cry, Kampei (どついたるねん,1989) both focused on the boxers' tenacious struggles at the end, completely cutting out the victory scenes and subsequent external reactions, and freezing the frame at the moment when the boxer embraces his coach or ending with the boxer's back. Ah, Wilderness and Underdog (directed by Masashi Takei after 100 Yen Love) have continued this approach of dissolving victory: the two protagonists in the former both knock each other down at the end, while the two protagonists in the latter stand embracing after fighting to the last moment, with no winner portrayed. The biographical film Kitten's Tears (子猫の涙,2008) about Japanese legendary boxer Eiji Morioka depicts his "life of total defeat." Rather than saying that the dissolution of victory is an opposition to result-oriented thinking and an emphasis on the process of challenging oneself, it is better to say that burning out one's life and exiting with grace regardless of victory or defeat have more psychological tension.

4.2. The "wabi-sabi" of defeat and the "aware" of non-victory

If this psychological tension derived from Japanese traditional aesthetic concepts is called "the aware of boxing," it can be divided into two types: "defeat" and "de-victory." The "withering" of cherry blossoms and the "dissipation" of fireworks in Japan symbolize the fleeting moments of brilliance. Brilliance and transience permeate each other inherently and complement each other aesthetically. "Defeat" emphasizes the lamentable contrast between process and result, as well as its own life philosophy as part of daily life, reflecting a "wabi-sabi" aesthetics of "seeing the universe in imperfection." Narazaki in Blue was originally an amateur boxer. In the final match, he gradually improved and performed brilliantly when facing an experienced opponent. When he sat resting behind the ring after the match, he heard the referee announce that he was not the winner. At this moment, the huge contrast between the image content and the sound creates a poignant drama. However, it is at this moment that his wonderful performance in the ring is anchored as "the brilliant moment just now." It is "defeat" rather than "victory" that affirms all his efforts to knock down his opponent. This is not an elegy for the weak, but a praise for ordinary mortals. Unlike Blue, the defeat in Keiko, Meantime is more like a comma in daily life. As a representative of the new wave of Japanese independent films, director Sho Miyauchi obviously practiced the "viewing" creation method proposed by Japanese film theorist Shigehiko Hasumi. "The key to the way of viewing is to face every fact on the screen without hesitation and with physical candor—that is, those visible and tangible material/physical elements" [14]. Keiko and the director form a polyphony of viewing. The indoor spaces in the film, such as apartments, boxing gyms, and streets, are filled with daily details in the foreground, middle ground, and background. Thus, what the audience sees is what Keiko sees, and also what the director sees while forgetting himself. The perspectives of the author, the audience, and the characters coincide to form a complete film. In this sense, the defeat in the ring truly fills Keiko's daily life. Unlike 100 Yen Love or Blue, its contained "wabi-sabi" is sometimes reflected in the foreground of weeds in street long shots or the middle ground of hanging socks in apartment long shots, and sometimes in the close-up of Keiko's scarred face as she sits by the river

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watching the water. The presentation of these details not only allows the audience to empathize with the character's mood but also reduces or equates "defeat" to the equivalent of these daily details. Coupled with the retro film tone and the worn-out feel of things in the frames, all reflect a "wabi-sabi" beauty.

The "de-victory" narrative has a similar process-emphasizing effect in representation, and the death plots contained in it have similarities with the aesthetic experience of "aftertaste" brought by frozen images. In the boxing ring, the winner can only be confirmed when the referee raises the winner's hand. The final scene of The Boxer shows the protagonist Tenma walking step by step towards his nearly blind coach Hayato after his opponent falls, and the film freezes and ends at the moment when the two embrace through the ropes. At the end of Don't Cry, Kampei, the female protagonist throws out the white towel symbolizing surrender, but at this moment, the male protagonist Eiji pushes his opponent away, and the referee waves his hands to indicate the end of the match, while Eiji lands a swing punch on his opponent's cheek, and the entire film freezes on Eiji's back at this moment. Both films create an aftertaste after the fierce battle through frozen images that do not clearly indicate the winner. Victory and defeat are not mentioned because they are irrelevant after the wonderful confrontation. Rather than saying that the two protagonists falling at the same time and embracing in Ah, Wilderness and Underdog both indicate that "there is no winner in the game of life," it is better to say that "life is not an arena."

In addition, the ending of the film Ashita no Joe (2011), adapted from the manga of the same name, is that the protagonist Joe Yabuki loses the match, but his opponent Rikiishi Tetsuya dies despite winning, echoing the final death of Joe Yabuki in the complete manga Ashita no Joe. Victory and defeat are dissolved in death. Death is to life as freezing is to film—freezing prompts the audience to recall the boxing match process, while death evokes the audience's review of his life. Death points to the inquiry of who the deceased was and why he died. The answer to the question is the very existence of the person. Therefore, the retroactivity embodied by the stillness of death and freezing contains the love and compassion for fleeting beautiful things in Japanese traditional aesthetics.

4.3. "Vita activa" and existentialism

In terms of social care and humanistic expression, Japanese boxing films respectively show two different aspects of Arendt and Sartre: "external" and "internal." "Man is only what he intends to be; he only exists in the realization of his intentions, so he is nothing but the sum of his actions; nothing but his life" [15]. Sartre's existentialism is a philosophy of action, and humans are completed through action. Although Hannah Arendt does not view human nature in isolation in Sartre's way, she emphasizes the interaction between humans and others—i.e., speech and action—and the importance of public space for humans. However, Arendt believes that "action is most closely related to the condition of natality; we can receive the new beginning inherent in birth in the world only because newcomers have the ability to initiate new things, that is, the ability to act" [16]. In this regard, Arendt and Sartre share a similar ideological recognition of the role of action in shaping humans.

In terms of social care, Arendt redefined "vita activa" (active life) as a political life in which humans participate in public space and interact with others through action and speech, in addition to labor and work. Labor, work, and action are the three indispensable conditions for active life. The social withdrawal of more than one million "hikikomori" in Japan seems to be due to their growth in economic conditions after the collapse of the bubble economy, leading to anxiety about the future. In fact, as scholars such as Tuukka Toivonen have pointed out, Japan responded to the pressure of

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globalization from the 1990s to the 21st century by reducing labor costs: "Japan's older generation of government and business elites protected the traditional lifelong employment system against reform pressures, limiting reforms to the expanding marginal labor force, which mainly consists of new entrants to the labor market, thereby hindering young people from contributing innovative ideas and strategies to enhance global market competitiveness" [17]. Thus, rather than saying that Japanese young people are unwilling to participate in public life, it is the severance of the conditions for active life that has led to their low-desire and hikikomori tendencies. At the same time, under such circumstances, it is difficult for those with insufficient education and delayed employment to enter the core labor market, forming group and generational identity anxiety. Ah, Wilderness was released in 2017, and its story is set in 2021, when the Japanese government, facing a serious "low birth rate," mandates youth military service and public welfare social labor, which is met with collective protests from young people. This reasonable inference about the future government crisis in Japan not only points to the conflict between the younger generation and the interest-based "silver generation" but also reflects the cruel and hopeless living conditions of young people, which are like a wilderness, when the Japanese government fails to regulate effectively.

If the characters' underclass status is a condition for cross-class inspirational narratives, then the social roles of characters in Japanese boxing films show the double hopelessness of conforming to the rules and resisting under the current economic system of contemporary Japan. From the texts of Kids Return to 100 Yen Love and Blue, the marginalized characteristics of their characters can be seen: hikikomori, part-time workers, high school graduates, and gang members. If director Takeshi Kitano emphasizes the ineffectiveness of boxing as an action for individuals to face themselves and society in such an era background, then director Masashi Takei optimistically shows that boxing itself is a public space to face others directly. Even if boxing cannot generate market or social value for individuals, it can become a driving force for individuals to take action. In connection with the champion economy of the champion industry, the boxing of ordinary people, in the social context where Japanese young people have no upward mobility channels, means that "even if individuals only make a living by doing part-time jobs, they can still find the nature of being human." Whether as caregivers, convenience store employees, barbers, or water deliverers, "labor, work, and action are indispensable as people's active life activities, and their interconnection and interaction together constitute a complete person in active life activities" [18].

On the other hand, in Sartre's sense, the sequence of Japanese boxing films provides characters with a spiritual path of inward self-transcendence from "person" to "individual." As a form of humanism, existentialism holds that human nature or definition is an open and dynamically infinite system, and "humans are still in the process of becoming." This dynamic view of existence is a vigilance against fascism, which imposes closed definitions on humans. To prevent such a dictatorial tendency towards others and oneself, humans should transcend the "present self" and move towards the "possible self." This humanism lies in self-liberation: one must liberate oneself through a certain ideal goal to truly embody one's humanity. If Arendt adopts a group-level perspective to view modern society, then Sartre starts from the individual's practical perspective. Regardless of the huge gap between cultural dominant goals (collective ideals) and institutional means supporting permanent employment (practical conditions), individuals must still complete their own maturation rather than confining themselves to their own "concentration camps." Kitten's Tears is not a biography of a champion boxer or a prominent figure. After a series of negative events—match defeats, blindness, repaying debts for his brother, his wife leaving home, and suffering from a serious illness—Morioka continuously completed his self-liberation and transcendence through action until his death. Thus, in the transcendent sense of existentialism, being a boxer is only a

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phased identity for him, not the complete Eiji Morioka. Similarly, in the close-up shots of Keiko's face by the river in Keiko, Meantime, her gaze always points to the flowing space of the river outside the screen. In the shot where she punches together with the coach played by Tomokazu Miura in the soon-to-be-demolished boxing gym, she wears a rare smile. The plot development of the film is like a "stream of life," and the cycle of "work—match—rest" flows like a river. It is in this process that Keiko as a person gradually emerges. "Humans are beings of the future" is precisely an accurate annotation of the fluidity of human nature. Rather than saying that Japanese boxing films tell stories of boxers or ordinary people becoming themselves, it is better to say that they all tell stories of how humans transcend and become human.

5. Conclusion

Boxing films are a niche genre in the Chinese film market. There is a certain barrier between their cultural background and spectacle mechanism and traditional Chinese action aesthetics, and narrative strategies and social observations are important ways to break this barrier. Except for nationalistic works like Ashita no Joe (2011), which grossed over 1 billion yen at the box office (according to statistics from the Motion Picture Producers Association of Japan), other Japanese boxing films target academic awards rather than market box office, which is also related to the current industrial system and aesthetic trends of Japanese cinema. In the history of American cinema, boxing films have always achieved both artistic and market success. Domestically, attempts at the genre have been made with films such as Never Say Never (2023), Jian Bing Man (2017), and Unbeatable (2013), which have also achieved above-average box office results, reflecting the filmmakers' grasp of contemporary emotions and audience tastes. The box office success of Hot Blooded (2024) during the Spring Festival may indicate that filmmakers' ability to capture group psychology and give full play to the communication role of new media platforms can make boxing, a niche culture in China, a hot topic for a time. Social issues including women's issues themselves are a cultural trend, forming a narrative tension with the traditional masculinity of boxing. Therefore, the research on boxing films from the perspectives of genre variation and cultural representation is of certain significance for the localized development of genres.

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