

Makoto Shinkai's "Disaster Trilogy": How To Live After Surviving Disasters

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Your Name Remembering

Record-keeping, through mythology and archival records, play a pivotal role in saving the lives of Itomori residents from the calamity of the Tiamat comet. Through preserving the memories of disasters, the tragic loss of life can be acknowledged, and the knowledge acquired to prevent or mitigate future danger is possible.

Prevention

Time-travel enables both protagonists to re-write the fate of 500 residents in Itomori. Taki serves as a knowledge disseminator through studying and uncovering the history of Itomori and partaking in its Shinto rituals; Mitsuha acts as an evacuation coordinator and safety activist. Through their success, the film advocates for the possibility and potential of disaster awareness and prevention.

Agency

In order to successfully save the population of Itomori, Mitsuha must challenge the law, city administration, her father, and societal norms and expectations. Croteau (2023) contrasts this responsible defiance to unfortunate circumstances on 3.11 where lives were lost to leaders committing themselves to inaccurate municipal instructions or pre-planned tsunami responses that could not apply to the current situation.

...and resists the erasure of tragic history, the desire to forget the past, and the ease of complacency and subservient behaviour in face of disasters.



Weathering With You

Survival

Through celebrating the rejection of Hina's attempt to sacrifice herself to save Tōkyō, the film rejects the concept of acceptable casualties. Hina and Hodaka desire to be alive, and that desire is respected and celebrated rather than admonished. When the film confirms that Hina's sacrifice would not have been a permanent solution, and that countless others have already attempted the same sacrifice, it confirms that her loss would only have been a tragedy.

Collective Responsibility

The film rejects the need for any one individual to sacrifice their life in order to prevent the flooding of Tōkyō from torrential rain. However, as seen with the adult characters of Keisuke and Natsumi, individual acts of empathy and bravery can combine into a force of collective action that saves lives. Keisuke and Natsumi push beyond societal and emotional boundaries to help save the life of Hina, and grow as individuals by helping rather than prioritizing their own needs.

Adaption

The ending of the film suggests that Tōkyō is merely returning to the floodplain that it had once been. Rather than attempt to resist the unyielding forces of nature, society must be willing to acknowledge dangers and adapt around nature.

...and resists against the needless sacrifice of lives, martyrdom, and anthropocentrism.



Suzume Acceptance

The film displays that trauma cannot be buried and forgotten. Suzume's constant suppression of her trauma of 3.11 disrupts her life and her relationships. By the film's conclusion, Suzume acknowledging her loss and grief allows her to connect more deeply to those around her, be more connected with the world around her, and begin the process of healing.

Appreciation

The abandoned ruins featured in the film are portrayed as beautiful, whereas Suzume focuses on what has been lost. This tension comes to a peak as the film's ensemble drives by an evacuated area of Fukushima irradiated by the 3.11 nuclear meltdown. Overlooking the evacuated and overgrown cityscape, Suzume is forced to reconcile with what the film has always been arguing through presentation—ruins are still beautiful and full of potential. The land can heal from disaster and become something extraordinary; and so too, can survivors.

Ritual

Suzume travels across Japan performing the door-locking ritual in areas devastated by Japan's past historical disasters: first, she must witness all of the human memories and emotions attached to the abandoned location. Then, she must recite a prayer to the *kami*, returning the borrowed land to the Divine Gods. Only then, can she lock the spiritual door and save areas from calamity.

Through this ritual, Suzume grieves and acknowledges sites of ruin. By confronting and accepting loss, the capacity to grow and rebuild at national, local, and personal levels flourishes.

Community

Suzume is helped and inspired by strangers across the country. This film encourages community building and kindness towards anyone who enters your life.

...and resists against the suppression of personal, local, and national trauma, the erasure of loss, and the abandonment of physical spaces.

Makoto Shinkai

Makoto Shinkai (born 1973) is a director, animator, and novelist. His works are associated with a style of incidental-romanticism, in which everyday objects such as food, rooms, and clothes become objects of visual fascination, and every environments have the potential to become a complex interaction of light, colour, and atmosphere. The events of 3.11 left a permanent impact on Makoto Shinkai and his filmography. Though he was in Tōkyō during 3.11, and does not consider himself a direct victim of the day's events, that his life could continue on as normal after such an event shook his view on everyday life in Japan: at every moment, people exist with the acceptance of a potential earthquake or tsunami occurring at any moment—people live “side-by-side with death,” and places can disappear at any moment (Shinkai, 2023). The disaster trilogy serves as a response to that realization.

March 11, 2011

The “triple disaster” on March 11, 2011 began with a 9.0 earthquake on Japan's east coast at 2:46pm—the worst ever recorded in the nation. A catastrophic tsunami soon followed. Damage from the tsunami subsequently caused the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant to have a nuclear meltdown, which resulted in the evacuation of the Fukushima prefecture and the irradiation of the surrounding environment. Thousands of lives were lost, thousands more displaced, and countless homes and coastal towns were destroyed.

Animation As Preservation

Makoto Shinkai's first film after 3.11 was *Garden of Words* (2013), which centers around the setting of Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden. Shinkai was inspired to preserve the park through film after 3.11, realizing that everyday normal places have the capacity to be instantly erased in the event of a natural disaster (The Jakarta Post, 2013). Through his direction, *Garden of Words* now serves as digital and emotional preservation. This desire to preserve spaces—not just their image but their feeling and affect—is displayed through every subsequent film, and is especially prevalent in *Suzume* where allegory is removed in favour of directly addressing currently existing places abandoned from natural to economic and social forces.

Introduction

How can you live meaningfully after witnessing a disaster? *Suzume* (2022) is the third film of an authorial trilogy from director, writer, and animator Makoto Shinkai, unofficially dubbed the “disaster trilogy.” The three films, *Your Name* (2016), *Weathering With You* (2019), and *Suzume* are not narrative sequels, yet are regarded as a trilogy due to their shared aesthetic, cultural, and narrative motifs. Beyond those similarities, however, is each film's pronounced presence of a natural disaster befalling an area of Japan and forever changing the land and lives of those impacted. Each film of Shinkai's disaster trilogy has been an explicit response to the events of the triple disaster that occurred on March 11th 2011 (nominalized as 3.11). Specifically, a response to the emotions Shinkai felt when confronted with its devastation. While all three films place their protagonists in similar situations in relation to a disastrous phenomena, each film presents different arguments on how to confront and grow from disaster. This research project examines Makoto Shinkai as an auteur to discover how the disaster trilogy uses genre, narrative, characters, and semiotics to answer the question: “How do we continue to live meaningfully after disaster?”

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine how each film portrays diegetic responses to its respective disastrous phenomena, to uncover the author's ideology and perspective regarding methods of recovering and growing from cataclysmic events. This achieved through content and visual analysis through the lens of cultural studies. Functions of narrative, characters, locations, symbols, and presentation are deconstructed as means of ideological and thematic expression. Visual and thematic decoding is attempted through the lens of historical, cultural, and local contexts. For *Your Name* and *Weathering With You*, a review of existing literature was conducted. Literature regarding *Suzume* is still developing; therefore, primary sources including interviews and statements from Makoto Shinkai were collected and considered for *Suzume*'s analysis. This methodology cannot and does not seek to establish a definitive interpretation nor presume the definite intention of the involved creators; rather, it proposes an informed reading with the evidence provided. This analysis primarily concentrates towards narrative and cultural analysis; however, a complete study of each film would benefit from further focus on religious and political references.

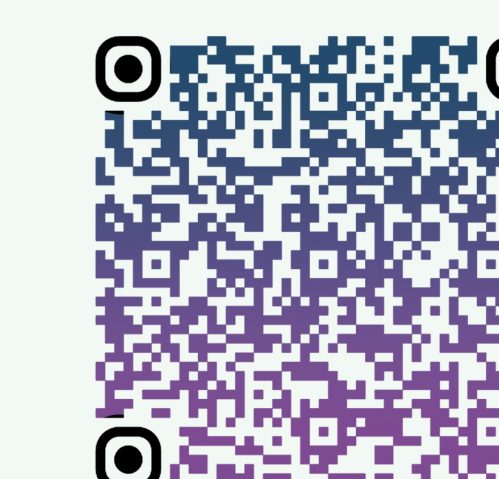
Conclusion

Your Name, *Weathering With You*, and *Suzume* are as much a disaster trilogy as they are a post-disaster trilogy. While all three films feature symbols of disaster (the comet, the torrential rain, and the earthworm) in their narrative that represent the destruction of 3.11, in essence they are reflections upon how to find meaning in a life after tragedy.

With *Your Name*'s re-do of Itomori's destruction, Shinkai argues that one should take responsibility in preventing death regardless of societal restraints, and refuse to bury the past. Through *Weathering With You*, Shinkai encourages survival without guilt, and promotes the potential of collective responsibility while rejecting the notion of individual martyrdom. In *Suzume*, Shinkai urges acceptance. Accept that the disaster happened; do not reject its memory—not to hurt nor to live in fear, but to embrace life and find hope in the world's endless capacity for re-growth.

By analyzing the presentation of Makoto Shinkai's ideology in each film, the mechanics of his storytelling and messages can be deconstructed. Furthermore, analysis reveals the disaster trilogy's politics and function as a response to personal, local, and national responses to 3.11, an auteur's personal journey of reflection and acceptance of tragedy, and animation as a means of communicating these messages to a global audience.

Bibliography



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I acknowledge and respect the ləkʷəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands, and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.