

“The world’s always been crazy anyway.”: Making Sense of Japanese Cultural Binaries in Makoto Shinkai’s *Your Name* and *Weathering With You*

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Introduction

Japanese animation, commonly referred to as anime, is a medium which has exploded into the international mainstream in recent years. That said, despite its recent boom, there has remained a disproportionately low amount of Western-oriented scholarly research regarding the medium. Despite foundational anime scholars— in particular, Susan Napier— writing as early as the turn of the century and some more limited frameworks being applied to anime even earlier, anime has remained a relatively untapped medium very much deserving of scholarly attention. My thesis is part of a growing reversal of that imbalance, with younger scholars putting added attention on anime’s role not just as a social phenomenon, but also as a storytelling medium and a place of meaning.

The many similarities between Shinkai’s *Your Name* and *Weathering With You* make them apt texts for comparison. Beyond just being directed and created by Shinkai, they’re both of the same genres (namely, young adult romance and low fantasy), feature a cast of characters that serve similar roles, share the same art style and animation direction, and even feature the same band for most of each movie’s soundtrack. Furthermore, their plots at first glance seem to follow similar story beats, and even the themes of the films match up quite well. *Your Name* is about a country girl and city boy being brought together by a fantastical power connected to traditional Japanese mythology/Shinto traditions until the girl is lost and needs to be saved from a force of nature only that particular power could circumvent, and *Weathering With You* can be simplified to the exact same basic summary, save for the home of the boy and girl being swapped. These films, when compared to one another as well as to real-world Japanese society and culture, reveal a very nuanced perspective of the intertwined nature of many cultural elements in Japan, including tradition, age, modernism, gender, and one’s relationship to nature and religion.

Background Information

The most central literary device to my interpretation and analysis of these two films is the concept of binary oppositions. Coming from the structuralist model of thinking, binaries put two opposing cultural elements in contrast to one another in order to highlight the details and differences on each side. Shinkai’s films rely on several key binaries to do their storytelling, and an in-depth analysis of how these binaries are presented reveals an interesting perspective on modern Japanese culture. The most central binaries between the two include tradition/modernism, gender, rural/urban, and nature/humanity.

Additionally, my analysis also considers the cultural conflict of a few very important historical events in recent Japanese history. First and foremost, the country’s relationship with natural disasters has always been fraught, but the Fukushima Triple Disaster of March 11th in particular is a tragedy of extreme importance in both these films. The combination of a tsunami, earthquake, and nuclear accident ravaged Japan, claiming tens of thousands of victims. This event still being in the collective consciousness of the Japanese people, depictions of disaster in the arts hold a special kind of intensity for a Japanese audience.

The aging population in and urbanization of Japan have both led to ongoing cultural conflicts throughout the nation. As less and less kids are being born and more and more citizens are moving to the cities, the responsibilities the nation has to its elders and to its rural communities has become a more frequent topic for debate in their political and socio-cultural spheres.

Finally, in line with all of these cultural identifiers, the country also has a very critical relationship with the environment. This in many cases overlaps with concerns for rural communities and with religion in particular, as Shintoism, the ancient animist religion of Japan, shares a close connection with nature. These connections between tradition, nature, and community all serve to complicate the breakdown of the binaries present in the films— including the gender and individualism/collectivism binaries I have not yet explored.

Observations

Your Name came out in 2016 and became the highest-grossing Japanese animated film of all time. The movie takes place primarily in two settings and focuses on a main character in each region: Mitsuha, a girl living in the rural village of Itomori, and Taki, a boy living in Tokyo. The movie follows the two 17 year-olds’ relationship as they deal with randomly swapping bodies with one another when they go to sleep, living out each other’s days and communicating via writing on their bodies, phones, and journals. The audience watches Mitsuha and Taki learn more about one another as well as the respective rural and urban cultures they’ve grown up in.

Through the exploration of one another’s lives, the audience is treated to an in-depth analysis of the interplay between rural/urban landscapes and gender roles. In particular, the role of the female, represented primarily through the character of Mitsuha, is connected to the rural, not only through her home in the rural landscape but also through her traditional shrine maiden responsibilities. On the flip side, the male is represented by the urban landscape, which in this film is shown through the westernized and idealistically-portrayed Tokyo.

The central conflict of the film centers around the disaster caused by a meteorite strike that bears a striking similarity to the Fukushima Triple Disaster. This meteorite results in the death of Mitsuha and her entire town, through which Taki eventually discovers he and Mitsuha were actually swapping bodies across time— with his timeline having been three years ahead of Mitsuha all along. Eventually, the movie finds a satisfying resolution, as Taki is able to travel back in time, swap with Mitsuha one last time, and evacuate all of the town before the disaster strikes, thus satisfying both collectivist and individualist motivations.

Significantly, the treatment of rural Japan throughout this movie seems to reflect a very Tokyo-centric perspective of Japan. Rural Japan is consistently treated as something nostalgic to be looked back on by the modern, urbanized Japanese people, which is a mindset highlighted throughout the film— not the least of which is due to the fact that Mitsuha’s timeline was literally three years in the past relative to Taki’s timeline. **Figure 1** demonstrates this very dynamic, as within the story, old Japan is frequently captured in black and white images, including photography and art. Though in this sense rural Japan is idealized, it deserves mentioning that the characters all only find their happy endings in Tokyo— rural Japan as a place is ultimately lost by the end of the film.

Weathering With You doubles down on this perspective of old, rural Japan as a dying-out ideal. The story takes place in a Tokyo that has been cursed with endless downpour and follows Hodaka, a runaway 15 year-old chasing his dreams of living in the city. Hodaka meets Hina, a 15 year-old girl connected to the Shinto-inspired fantastical elements of the film. Hina reveals to Hodaka that she has the power to periodically stop the endless rain through praying to the gods. She is known as a "sunshine girl," and after discovering this, Hodaka encourages Hina to make a business out of her gift. They work together to make money using her power to make people happy, but towards the climax of the film the audience, Hina, and finally Hodaka all learn that her power comes with a price— with each prayer for sunshine, she literally fades away, a sacrifice for the gods. Ultimately, Hodaka is faced with a choice: he can either allow Hina to sacrifice herself to stop the rain and save Tokyo, or he can save Hina and doom Tokyo to endless rain. He chooses to save Hina, and years later the audience sees the characters seemingly satisfied with the outcome of their choices.

On multiple levels, this film continues to develop on the ideas from *Your Name*. In a meta sense, this film further explores the urbanization and Tokyo-centric nature of modern Japanese culture by setting the film entirely in Tokyo. This can also be seen visually through moments like those in **Figure 2**, in which a shrine, a piece of “old Japan,” is depicted atop an abandoned building— this image signifying the risk of “old Japan” being consumed and forgotten by the increasing urbanization of the nation. Ultimately, this movie complicates the resolution of *Your Name* by proposing another option: what if one’s individualist desire clashes with the collective’s wellbeing? The image a flooded Tokyo in **Figure 3** further emphasizes the shift in lenses from the rural to urban landscape, with *Weathering With You* ultimately visually presenting a much more grim outlook for these Japanese cultural conflicts. Even so, the characters seem to accept the state of the city, claiming that “The world’s always been crazy anyway.”



Figure 1: Taki visits an art exhibit featuring photos of rural Japan.



Figure 2: Hina visits a small shrine atop a worn-down building.

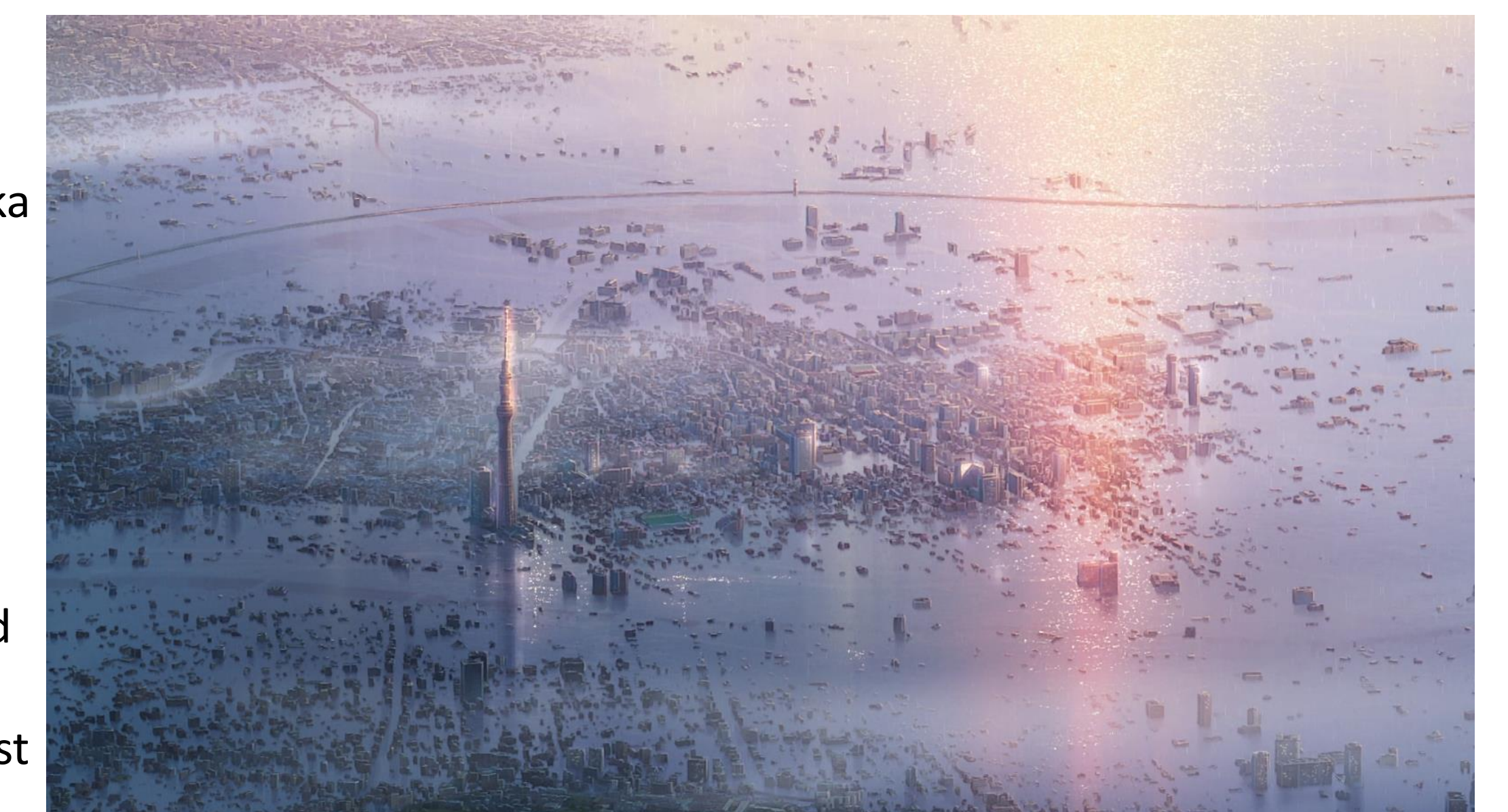


Figure 3: Tokyo is flooded at the end of *Weathering With You*.

Conclusions

Both of these films are ultimately capturing and exposing a number of conflicts deeply rooted in modern Japanese culture. I strongly believe that the binaries I have presented and analysed throughout these analyses provide an excellent framework for taking a look at these cultural conflicts, but I do not believe the work is done. Both *Your Name* and especially *Weathering With You* deserve much more scholarly attention, as the cultural conflicts they are facing are not going anywhere. Considering everything from their population crisis to political corruption to cultural shifts and disparities, while I believe I have provided a good framework for viewing how all of these issues are correlated and expressed through Shinkai’s works, there is simply too much to talk about for me to have captured it all in this one thesis. Indeed, this is my call to action for scholars— anime is an ever-growing and ever-changing medium reflecting the cultural context of a country that is currently caught in an extremely important cultural conflict. As the climate and population crises both accelerate, the binaries I’ve addressed in these films as well as the films themselves will only become increasingly relevant in the future.

