

Research Article

Travel in Japan's Postgrowth Hyperrealities and National Conservative Ideology: Shinkai Makoto's *Suzume No Tojimari*

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Abstract

Suzume no tojimari (2022) depicts the coming-of-age road trip of a teenage girl through abandoned places, in order to save Japan from giant earthquake worms, and to confront her own past of 3/11. With hyperrealistic visuals and references to Shinto mythology and folklore traditions, the movie constructs a correlation between human misbehavior and natural disasters. This narrative indicates the restoration of a mythological unity of Japanese land, people, and culture to prevent earthquakes, and to overcome personal and social issues, echoing Japanese national conservative discourse. By doing so, the movie puts moral responsibility to the individual to cope with disasters and decline.

Keywords: Anime; Fukushima; Earthquake; National Identity; Mythology

Introduction

Contemporary Japanese society struggles with economic postgrowth and population shrinkage, most visible in rural areas, as well as with the constant situation of insecurity and fear toward natural disasters, especially since the Tohoku Triple Disaster of March 11, 2011 (hereafter 3/11). These enduring crises triggered, similar to many other modern societies, a conservative turn, i.e., a renaissance of national ideology and mythology, which occurred in the recent decade in Japanese politics and mass and digital media (Kawamura and Iwabuchi 2022). In this essay, I analyze the animation movie *Suzume no tojimari* to investigate how such national conservative narratives and tendencies are echoed in popular culture and what implications can be drawn from this.

Suzume no tojimari (2022; literally: Suzume's door closing, titled *Suzume* in the West), directed by Shinkai Makoto, centers around Iwato Suzume, a teenage girl from Miyazaki Prefecture living together with her aunt. Suzume travels to several deserted sites of rural Japan, where magical doors to an otherworld appear. She is accompanied by Sōta, a professional "door closer," who tries to close these doors in abandoned places through which earthquake-inducing giant worms can enter the real world and cause damage. He is, however, transformed into a chair by a mysterious talking cat called Daijin, who is first seen escaping from the heroine

but later supports her. As the story progresses, Suzume visits her home place in Fukushima, which was devastated by the events of 3/11, and by which her mother was also killed. Facing her own past allows Suzume, together with human-again Sōta, to defeat the earthquake worms from causing another serious earthquake, at least for the moment, and to return to her home in Miyazaki. *Suzume no tojimari* was one of the most commercially successful Japanese movies of 2022 and was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Animated Movie in 2024; the award, however, was eventually won by Miyazaki Hayao's last movie *Kimitachi wa dō ikiru ka* (2023; literally: How do you live?, titled *The Boy and the Heron* in the West).

Alistair Swale (2020: 214) commented on Shinkai's *Kimi no na wa* (2016, *Your name*) that this earlier movie "might be described as an almost spiritual and culturally essentialist set of premises. It is unmistakably a self-consciously very Japanese film in its motifs and settings." I claim that the same is true for *Suzume no tojimari*. Suzume's quest, which is embedded into a hyperreality with references to Shinto mythology, folklore traditions, historical catastrophes, and their localities, eventually concludes with understanding and reestablishing an eternal unity of Japanese land, people, and culture. Such an allegedly determined correlation of geography/soil, ethnicity/race, and culture/language is a central assumption of the discourse on the uniqueness of the Japanese people/culture (*Nihonjinron/Nihonbunkaron*) (Befu 2001: 95). In *Suzume no tojimari*, the embracing of this mythological unity can (temporarily) solve the menace of earthquakes that resulted from a disturbance in this harmony, i.e., people forgetting

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their spiritual origins and traditions. However, this unity is fragile and depends on individual efforts, not on those of the state or society as a collective. In other words, the movie allegorically advocates rediscovering national identity and responsibility as a cure to cope with disaster or decline. Instead of questioning the role of politics for relief, it proposes a deeply apolitical but at the same time essentialist mindset, which echoes Japan's contemporary neoliberal and national conservative ideology.

This essay will begin by elaborating the hyperreality of *Suzume no tojimari*. The “more real than reality” animated images of the movie blur the borders of media and reality and so provide a simulated dark tourism trip to disaster-stricken and abandoned places. Through implications and marketing for contents tourism to the model locations, the audience is animated to travel as Suzume did and to, similar to the heroine, (re)discover their national and cultural identity. One crucial part of this essentialized identity is Shinto mythology and spiritual beliefs accumulated under the buzzword “new animism,” which will be analyzed in the second section, as *Suzume no tojimari* draws heavily but at the same time quite loosely from both sources. Mythology and folklore-based interpretations of earthquakes date back to the premodern era, but especially with 3/11, these ideas received a revival to define the Japanese people. The third section will engage in this interpretation and relate the concept of earthquakes as national disasters to *Suzume no tojimari*, reflecting the political and media discourse on 3/11. The fourth section will then focus on the postgrowth countryside, in particular the places stricken by disasters and their ruins that serve as *lieux de mémoire* in the movie, as references to historical events connected with mythology and spirituality, i.e., as the manifestations that bring Japanese land, people, and culture together. The people of these rural places are depicted as living in financial precarity and outside of nuclear families; however, similar to natural disasters, these social issues in *Suzume no tojimari* arise in an individual and apolitical space. The conclusion will further elaborate on this and summarize the findings that the movie in question lacks to provide any criticism or claims against real-world issues but, in a certain way, exploits disaster for emotional entertainment. Ultimately, it promotes indulgence and rediscovering identity through national conservative ideology on an individual level to overcome contemporary crises.

Hyperreality and simulated dark tourism

Hyperreality refers to a situation or object for which the lines between reality and representation are unclear or even completely vanished, i.e., something that feels “realer than reality.” The concept was prominently coined by Umberto Eco (1986) after his experience of visiting American tourist sites where the fusion of holograms and reconstructions of popular culture and European culture felt for him as if traveling in a simulation. With the technical and artistic evolution of animation and computer-generated imagery (CGI) movies, the hyperreality found its presence on the screens. In contrast to “traditional” photography or live-action movies, present-days’ animation and CGI technology

creates plenty of “absolute fakes” of real existing objects and places. These “absolute fakes” are, according to Eco (1986), surpassing their real-life originals (or inspirations) because of their perfectness in detail and in adjustment to the consuming audience. Jean Baudrillard (1988) similarly describes hyperreality by referring to the example of the tourist theme park Disneyland as a simulation of reality, i.e., a simulacrum, and criticizes consumerist culture’s obsession with hyperrealism, in which they constantly seek for the most “real” and “authentic” products.

The idea of hyperreality was employed to describe modern Japanese popular culture such as manga, anime, and videogames. Stevie Suan (2013: 194) argues for anime in general:

When viewing the landscapes, characters, creatures and machines in anime, it is evident that they are, for the most part, depicted in a “hyperrealist” style. Though many of the objects, mecha, buildings, and landscapes do not exist in our reality, they are very detailed in their depiction . . . All are created in this ‘more realistic than reality’ style to create another world, another possible reality on screen.

To further define this (hyper)reality in Japanese animation, Otsuka Eiji differentiated between three realisms apparent in anime and manga: first, a “biological realism” of physical bodies that can get injured or die in the same ways as humans or other real-life creatures; second, a “scientific realism” such as the photorealistic depiction of mechanical objects, even if those do not exist in reality, they refer to elements of real existing objects; and third, a “manga-anime realism” that follows conventions of manga and anime and that is not rooted in realism of the real world, for example, exaggerated facial expressions or magic (Steinberg 2014).

Anime movies such as *Suzume no tojimari* usually contain all these three types of realism to different degrees, while with the advancing technology of animation and CGI, the second type of photographic realism deserves special attention. Tim Shao-Hung Teng (2022: 477) explains director Shinkai’s different technological approach to animation that produces these hyperreal images, here referring to *Kimi no na wa*:

Marking a departure from the cel tradition best represented by Studio Ghibli, Shinkai’s digitally rendered background, rife with nuances impossible to take in all at once, relies on techniques such as 3D modeling and automatic color sensing to achieve the effect of the hyperrealistic and to overcome difficulties of manual calibration.

The photographic realism becomes even more persuasive in combination with manga-anime realism, i.e., the typical visual conventions for anime and manga, to depict human characters, animals, supernatural creatures, etc. in a distinct stylized manner. The clashing divergence of these “real” (photo-realistic) and “unreal” (stylized and following genre conventions) elements in animation highlights each other’s effectiveness (Suan 2013 : 33). This effect becomes particularly strong, when the rather “blurry” anime characters are set in a hyperreal background combining different techniques of animation (Figure 1).

Director Shinkai’s aim for creating a “realer than real” simulation of contemporary Japan in *Suzume no tojimari* goes so far that the movie is set in the unusual 12:5 frame, instead of today’s common 16:9. Shinkai explained in an interview

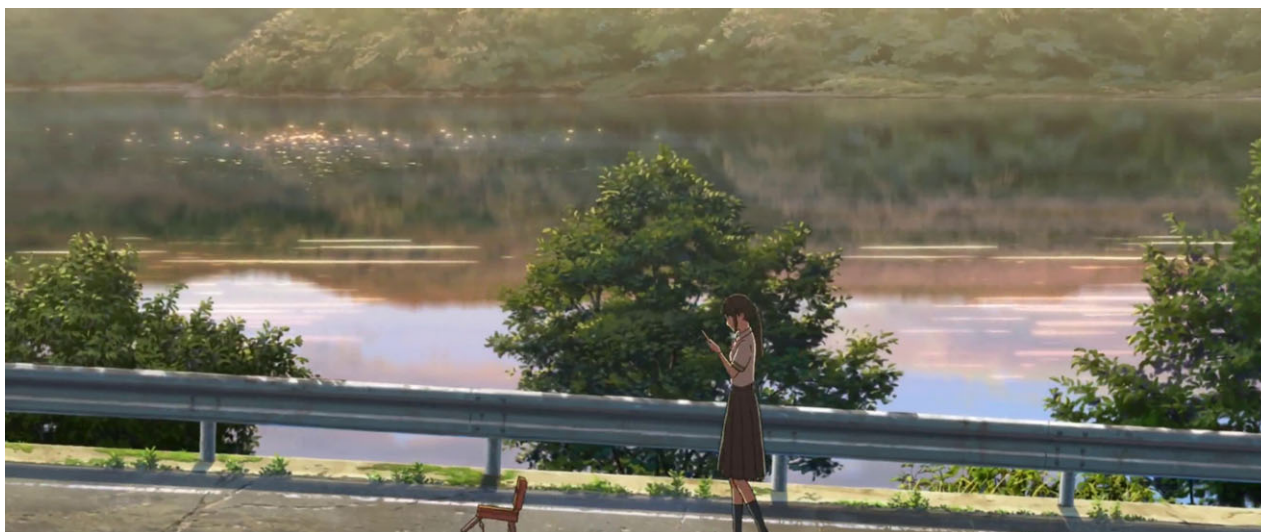


Figure 1: Suzume is walking on a countryside road with Sōta as a chair. (©2022 Suzume no tojimari sakusei iinkai).



Figure 2: Ruins in the abandoned onsen town. (©2022 Suzume no tojimari sakusei iinkai).

that, besides the challenge of trying something new, he felt that this frame feels more natural and is closer to the human eyes' sight frame (Shinkai and CoMix Wave Films 2023: 987). Besides all the automatized effects handled by design software and artificial intelligence (AI), there is yet also a human-made final check and correction by Shinkai for the composition of light and shadow to best approach (even surpass) real-world images (CoMix Wave Films 2023: 203).

All these efforts to produce a uniquely hyperrealistic style of animation not only result in stunning (and sometimes overwhelming) visuals but function as familiar references for the viewers, in particular when it comes to famous landscapes and mundane situations of daily life. In Shinkai's earlier movie *Tenki no ko* (2020, literally: Weather child, titled *Weathering with You* in the West), Yoneyama Shoko (2020: 4) wrote in this sense: "The film presents super-realistic illustrations of the everyday lives of desperately poor young people." Likewise, *Suzume no tojimari* contains

plenty of such "absolute fakes" of the Japanese mundane, such as colorful cityscapes or overloaded teenagers' bedrooms but also ruins of capitalism and postgrowth such as an abandoned amusement park and an onsen (hot spa) resort town overgrown by plants (Figure 2). For a domestic viewer, these images likely evoke a feeling of familiarity, as they are very much rooted in contemporary Japan's sociocultural environment and daily life; for example, the fact that, throughout the movie, Suzume wears her school uniform, identifying her as an ordinary or even stereotypical Japanese teenage girl.

Most sites shown in the movie are a blend of real and fictional aspects. For example, the abandoned amusement park visited around half of the movie, is itself based on a still-existing amusement park located in Kobe, which was here depicted as ruins abandoned after the Kobe Earthquake of 1995. As this example shows, creating hyperrealistic representation, i.e., simulacra, of these sites is not just the

amplification of real-world visuals and references but also includes a process of rearrangement, remix, and, most importantly, reinterpretation. More controversial is, in this sense, the depiction of the ruins of Fukushima. While they first seem to be part of a fantastic otherworld, in the finale of the movie, it becomes clear that these ruins are rooted in the realities of 3/11. In interviews, Shinkai mentioned that some people, especially those who were affected by 3/11, felt offended by his depiction of these events and their aftermath in *Suzume no tojimari* (Ohara 2022; Sekihara 2022), and, additionally, Motegi Ken'nosuke (2022) criticized the risk of triggering viewers' trauma.

How to deal with the real-life tragedy of 3/11 in popular culture, such as anime, especially while keeping in mind that such content is meant to entertain and sell, ultimately following the logics of capitalism and consumerism and not necessarily prioritizing moral values such as acknowledging and respecting the traumas and desolations of those who were affected by a disaster? There has been a vivid discussion in Japan on the commodification of 3/11, for example, through so-called dark or disaster tourism. Azuma Hiroki, who is well-known for his interpretation of Japanese otaku as "database animals," and Kainuma Hiroshi, who wrote on the nuclear history of Fukushima and initiated the idea of Fukushima studies (Kainuma 2011), were originally working together on a (dark) tourism concept for Fukushima after the disaster (Jang, Sakamoto and Funck 2022). However, while Azuma remained positive about such ambitions, as he was also involved in similar tourism activities in Chernobyl, Kainuma retorted that the people in Fukushima are not willing to exploit the disaster image for tourism purposes (Azuma 2017). Both of their positions have their arguments. On the one hand, dark tourism, while booming in the West, could be a chance to economically revitalize the Tohoku region. On the other hand, the idea of dark tourism is still contentious in Japan and receives cultural backlash (Jang, Sakamoto and Funck 2022). In either way, the promotion of Fukushima as a tourist destination explicitly because of 3/11 and its dark aftermath remains debatable, if not controversial.

Suzume no tojimari is ultimately a road-trip movie that depicts Suzume's travel through various abandoned and disaster-stricken places in rural Japan, finally taking her to Fukushima, the most prominent site of disaster in Japan's recent history. The dark touristic travel, about which Azuma and Kainuma dispute, is simulated on the screen, but with the trend of contents tourism, domestic and international fans likely aim to follow the heroine's travel route and so transfer it to the real world. Nishijima Ryoko (2020: 40), who has studied the contents tourism for Shinkai's previous movie *Kimi no na wa*, argues: "Contents tourism does not necessarily have a clear division between contents—the fiction—with tourism—the reality. The process of routinizing travel allows one to quickly go back and forth between fiction and nonfiction until they begin to blur." Thus, contents tourism emerges in a liminal space, in which pop-cultural content and real-world events can be overlayed or even intermingled, expanding media's hyperreality.

In the case of *Suzume no tojimari*, contents tourism, likely coinciding with dark tourism, is nurtured by various

incentives. For instance, in Oita Prefecture, an initiative by the local tourism division and an art high school placed a solitary door, similar to that in the movie, in the ruins site, which served as the model location for the abandoned onsen town depicted on screen (Figure 3). Furthermore, travel experiences related to *Suzume no tojimari* are proactively supported and commodified through the "Japan's door closing project" (*Nihon no tojimari purojekuto*), which is advertised at the movie's official homepage. This project is a collaboration between the movie production company and a variety of businesses that invites viewers to consume exclusive licensed products while traveling through Japan similar to Suzume to support the country and its people, as the text on the promotion webpage says: "Today's Japan is confronted with numerous difficulties. We want to brighten up this Japan. With this in mind, we, local companies in each of the 47 prefectures of Japan, are looking at what we can do now to move on together with the local people. Like Suzume." (Suzume no tojimari Production Committee, 2022, own translation).

However, a disclaimer at the top of the official movie homepage also warns: "After viewing *Suzume no tojimari*, please be considerate to local residents and behave with moderation and good manners when visiting places that appear in or are related to the film." The certain irony of an ambitious travel collaboration campaign on one hand, but coincidentally this disclaimer to respect the local residents on the other hand, recapitulates the double-edged sword of contents/dark tourism and so of hyperreality in media. Another disclaimer on the homepage warns on the usage of earthquake alarms in the movie, which might be sensitive for some viewers, even though they are not entirely the same to the real-world ones. Yet these close-to-reality signals also blur the boundaries of media and reality and certainly provoke strong emotions for those who have witnessed them in a real emergency.

Japanese mythology, animism, and folklore rediscovered

Suzume no tojimari is an archetypical story of a hero(ine)'s journey (Campbell 1949), where the protagonist, here Suzume, goes on a liminal quest through which she will overcome her weakness, take responsibility, save Japan, and return as a grown character. This very classic way of storytelling is profoundly flavored with elements of Japanese mythology and folklore. Director Shinkai commonly employs such tropes in his movies, for example, by including the Shinto ritual of *kuchikamizake* (saliva rice wine made by shrine maidens) and the idea of *musubi*, being bonded together by destiny, in *Kimi no na wa* (Karatsu 2021). Melissa Croteau (2023) even considers the sky scenery and light compositions in this movie as related to Shinto, besides the narrative tropes. In *Tenki no ko*, similarly, shrine gates (*torii*) and the idea of "weather shrine maidens" (*tenki no miko*) play an important role for the story (Yoneyama 2020).

In *Suzume no tojimari*, again, ideas rooting in Shinto mythology and folklore traditions are crucial for the development of the story and eventually for saving Japan from earthquakes. The borders between religion and folklore



Figure 3: Suzume's door installation in Oita, February 2025 (Photograph by Kai Tomohiro, used with permission).

are, however, often blurred in media. Yoneyama (2021) describes for the anime movies of Miyazaki Hayao, that there is the nationalist State Shinto on one hand, and the meaning of Shinto as intangible cultural heritage on the other hand, while Miyazaki, according to Yoneyama, understands Shinto as the latter. Yoneyama, more precisely, regards this perspective of Shinto as a new or revitalized form of animism, which she terms in the case of Miyazaki as “critical animism” for its environmental awareness of issues in the Anthropocene. Still, it is notable that Miyazaki’s environmental and religious stances are not without contradictions but commonly drawing from a rather essentialist understanding of Japanese culture (Thomas 2007; Thelen 2020).

Similarly to Yoneyama’s (2021) view on anime director Miyazaki, Croteau (2023) describes for Shinkai’s *Kimi no na wa* that this movie presents a Shinto not to be confused with the ultra-nationalist movement of modern Japan. However, a clear separation between the two kinds of Shinto is likely impossible, as well as to define where an institutionalized religion starts and ends and how much there is an authentic tradition in it. Secularization, or the redrawing and reshaping of boundaries between religion and the secular in Japan, is a dynamic and continuous process since these categories came up in the Meiji era, influenced not only by religious actors

and scholars but also by political institutions, the public *Zeitgeist*, and also commercial interests. In other words, “[w]hat counts as religion continues to be debated and negotiated” (Rots and Teeuwen 2017: 3).

In the context of (re)negotiating religion in Japan’s society, a movement of rediscovered or reinvented animism—an originally derogatory term associated with primitivity—started in the 1970s by intellectuals and became particularly prominent through popular culture such as anime in the recent three decades. (Neo-)animism is here an umbrella term, often written in katakana as a loanword, for several phenomena related to a new discourse of Japanese culture and spirituality influenced by Shinto and traditionalist, as well as anticonsumerist and antimaterialist movements (Rambelli 2019: 6). The discourse on new animism has evolved in attempts to distance Japanese religion from the State Shinto, but nonetheless embedded in the ideology of a special relationship of the Japanese people toward spirituality, nature, *kami* (gods/deities), and also natural disasters; it is part of the *Nihonjinron* discourse on the uniqueness of Japanese people and culture in contrast to both the West and Asia (ibid. 6). Yet, as argued above, different interpretations of Shinto, intermingled with folklore traditions and diverse spiritual beliefs, are

commonly mixed up and set into a national conservative worldview essentializing Japanese people and culture. With a similar understanding, Ioannis Gaitanidis (2019: 70) argues that

The [new] animism imagined to be at the (ahistorical) basis of Japanese religiosity (and consequently of Japanese New Religious Movements) today is therefore a later product, born out of a combination of national and international trends, a rising Nativist conservatism aimed at linking individual development to national growth, and an influx of Anglo-Saxon spiritualist beliefs and practices that focused on the communication with the dead from the Taishō period onwards.

Suzume no tojimari, likewise, presents a blend of tropes deriving from Shinto mythology, folklore traditions of the Edo period, and tendencies of so-called new Japanese animism. The first and most obvious trope are the earthquakes, that are, in the narrative of the movie, caused by giant worms (*mimizu*) living under the earth. These worms are supernatural entities, depicted as dark-reddish streams without a clear shape. The story remains vague on their origins, they just seem to have always been under the Japanese islands (and somewhat only there). A “key” or “foundation stone” (*kaname-ishi*) is needed to seal a potential entrance for them, which are called “doors” (*to*) and which also connect the human world to the otherworld. They appear as a risk when places are abandoned in rural Japan and cause earthquakes. Professional “closers” (*to-shi*) travel through Japan and take care that the key stones are placed in the right way at the sites. The events of the movie are kickstarted as Suzume accidentally moves such a key stone.

The motif of magical doors to an alternative world is a universal trope of fantasy stories worldwide, most prominently known from Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865). In the same vein, the closing of such magical doors to lock up memories/trauma or the passing of such thresholds as a transition to adulthood are very obvious cultural symbols. The “doors” in *Suzume no tojimari* are, moreover, references to Shinto mythology. Most prominent is the episode of sun goddess Amaterasu hiding behind the heavenly cave door (*ama no iwato*) from the other gods; Suzume’s family name Iwato is likely an allusion to that story. Similarly, the deity whose dancing let Amaterasu leave the cave was Ama-no-uzume—the probable origin of Suzume’s name. Another reference from Japanese mythology is Izanagi’s sealing of the entrance to the underworld (*yomi*) with a huge boulder after failing to rescue Izanami from there. This episode not only includes the motif of door closing to another realm but also resembles the storyline of Suzume trying to bring back Sōta from there (in opposition to Izanagi, however, successfully). Likewise, the terms used in the movie for the eternal otherworld—*tokoyo*—and the human world—*ushiroyo*—originate from Shinto mythology.

The idea of supernatural creatures being connected to or even causing natural disaster is a motif in mythology worldwide. In Japan, talismanic earthquake maps (*Dai Nihonkoku jishin no zu*) date back to the fourteenth century, depicting giant dragon-like serpents supposedly living around and inside the archipelago and causing earthquakes

(Weisenfeld 2012: 22). Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, these maps gained popularity, and the depiction of dragon-like creatures shifted to giant catfish, probably due to belief that catfish (*namazu*) tend to act weirdly before earthquakes (ibid.). These earthquake maps of the nineteenth centuries also include key or foundation stones, which were similar to those in the movie called *kaname-ishi*, that should be put into the head of the dragon/catfish to defeat them, and which remain as landmarks after the dead bodies of the supernatural creatures turned into soil. After the Ansei Earthquake of 1855, talismanic artworks of key stones being installed to defeat or ban catfish also depicted Amaterasu, the mythological ancestor of the imperial family, as leading other deities; Gregory Smits (2006: 1068) recognizes here a proto-nationalism, a sense of Japanese imagined community, spreading among Edo’s common people.

In *Suzume no tojimari*, historical earthquake maps and key stone depictions are not only reproduced but also remixed and amplified to fit the story (Figure 4 and 5). Especially images related to the Great Kanto Earthquake 1923 served as inspiration for the depiction of the pseudo-historical documents in the movie; one staff member of the anime production was even specialized in recreating such old-style Japanese drawings (CoMix Wave Films 2023: 196). These “absolute fakes” line up with the hyperreal images of landscapes and mundane situations, described in the previous section, to create a fictional but yet seemingly authentic simulation of Japan, in which land, people and culture are deeply connected. According to beliefs from the Edo period, catfish may likely cause earthquakes at moments of social and moral crisis, i.e., regarding natural disasters in cause–effect relationship with human behavior (Weisenfeld 2012: 25). In *Suzume no tojimari*, likewise, the place of the “doors” are abandoned sites in the countryside where native spirituality, culture, and memory seemingly are forgotten, which triggers the worms.

As a sidenote, however, besides these old sources, director Shinkai also mentioned in an interview with NHK (2022) another, more recent influence: in Murakami Haruki’s short story *Kaeru-kun, Tokyo wo sukuu* (2002; translated title: *Super-Frog Saves Tokyo*), a frog (*kaeru-kun*) fights against a giant worm (*mimizu-kun*) to save Tokyo from an earthquake. In this way, the folklore in *Suzume no tojimari* is not only plainly reflecting supposed traditions but also includes contemporary content, such as this short story by one of Japan’s most famous living authors. However, while in Murakami’s short story, humans are just witnessing from the outside how supernatural creatures cause earthquakes, in *Suzume no tojimari*, and some humans such as the heroine and the door closers can actively intervene to prevent natural disasters (Motegi 2022).

The earthquake worms are not the only characters in the movie related to Japanese folklore. The two key stones transform after being removed and turn into speaking cats, supposedly inspired by cat *yōkai* such as *bakeneko* (goblin cat) or *nekomata* (split-tail cat). Such creatures were depicted in the folklore as tricksters, sometimes also as vicious, existing



Figure 4: Old image of Sōta's family on key stones, replicating real historic documents. (©2022 Suzume no tojimai sakusei iinkai).



Figure 5: Key stone image from 1855 (Image courtesy of the University of Tokyo General Library—o-soro kanshin kaname-ishi).

on the threshold between the human world (civilization, i.e., domesticated) and the otherworld (i.e., wilderness or the realm of mystery), sometimes showing human-like behavior, such as the ability to speak or walk on two legs, and in the case of *nekomata*, symbolized by the split-tail (Foster 2015). In *Suzume no tojimari*, the first key stone turns into the white kitten Daijin, whose name resembles that of a deity, being written in katakana similar to those of Shinto deities today; the same is true for the name of the second key stone cat, Sadaijin. In addition, the characters Daijin and Sadaijin, which seem emotionally unstable and playing around with Suzume but not necessarily being evil, is reminiscent of *tanuki* and other animal-related *yōkai* (supernatural creatures unaffected by human worship) commonly depicted as tricksters (Komatsu 2006). Besides this folklore background, cats are in the present-day world also popular as cute meme animals, as the movie also depicts the hype of posting photos of Daijin on social media, which eventually helps Suzume to track them.

The male main character Sōta becomes cursed early on in the movie and is transformed into a children's chair with three legs, that can, however, move and speak. This depiction resembles the idea of *tsukumogami*; these are objects in daily life, such as furniture or tools, that turn into *yōkai* after 100 years, and which may then seek revenge in case the owner has disposed them without gratitude for their service (Komatsu 2006). They will stepwise develop anthropomorphic features such as legs or a face until they completely transform into an *oni* (demon/devil) (ibid.). Although the context is different in *Suzume no tojimari*, namely, a curse, the depiction of Sōta as a walking and talking chair with a face-like upper part is likely related to the idea of *tsukumogami* and animism. The chair, in which he is transformed, was originally a self-made present by Suzume's mother for her. However, over the years, Suzume loses this memory, and the chair's value is likewise forgotten, until around 70 minutes in the movie, when Sōta (inside the chair still) is sacrificed to save Tokyo from an earthquake. The heroine then remembers this episode in a flashback; I will talk about the concept of memory and forgetting in more detail in the fourth section of this essay.

Ultimately, the earthquake worms, the key stone cats, and the chair-turned Sōta are not only loosely rooted in mythology and folklore, but may also be regarded as part of a renaissance of (new) animism in Japan. However, the employment of animistic tropes does not give the anime movie itself a greater ontological meaning or value, nor does it turn it into a potential promotion of (new) animism for its audience. Jolyon Baraka Thomas (2019) claims that using the term "animism" to describe animation movies causes confusion, as the concept itself in its contemporary intellectual usage is flawed and ambiguous, and that movies can neither reflect an animistic worldview of the director, nor inspire the (young) audience to (re)engage in animism. Instead of animism, Thomas (2019: 170) considers that anime such as *Kimi no na wa* expresses "cultivated vulnerability", i.e., "a willingness to eschew cynicism in favor of enchantment, awe, and togetherness." I have a similar perspective on *Suzume no tojimari*, which also echoes Yoneyama's (2020) view

of Shinkai's earlier movie *Tenki no ko*, arguing that the references and employment of Shinto mythology in Shinkai's oeuvre are very obvious but not reflecting a profound and coherent religious tradition. The supernatural tropes in *Suzume no tojimari* are, eventually, syncretistic pieces loosely originating from various sources put together to appeal to a contemporary audience. They are, on the one hand, magical elements typical for the anime/manga genre, but, on the other hand, reflecting the trend of rediscovering Shinto, folklore, or new animism as essentialized Japanese qualities. As Thomas (2007: 83) has noticed for anime director Miyazaki, the very same is true for Shinkai:

Miyazaki has publicly recognized the consumer demand for spiritual content in Japan, and continues to make movies with this in mind. Miyazaki's moviemaking, therefore, not only reflects his personal spirituality but also the audience's desire for spiritual themes; simultaneously, it reflects his basic desire to entertain and the audience's desire to be entertained.

Eventually, the entertainment-focused narrative of *Suzume no tojimari* consists of a wild blend of influences, which has various logical flaws (e.g., what causes earthquakes outside of the Japanese archipelago? How can the "doors" and the "door-closing" profession be unknown to the public over centuries?).

Dealing with national disaster as part of the Japanese identity

March 11 was maybe the most crucial event in postwar Japan's history. According to the Reconstruction Agency (2024), an organ of the Japanese government charged with the reconstruction of 3/11's aftermath, close to 20,000 people were killed and ca. 2,600 are still missing, while over 470,000 people were evacuated and ca. 30,000 still have evacuee status in 2023. Although the triple disaster only hit the Tohoku region, the already exploited and neglected hinterland behind Tokyo (Kainuma 2011), 3/11 has been constructed not as a regional, but as a national disaster in the public discourse. It was eventually elevated to a national and collective trauma with key terms such as *sōteigai*, indicating that such a natural disaster (in particular its impact on the nuclear power plant of Fukushima) was "unforeseeable," and catchphrases to retrieve a collective national identity such as *Gambārō Nippon—Kokoro wo hitotsu ni Nippon* (Fight on Japan! Our hearts as one for Japan) (DiNitto 2014: 342). In a similar direction of ideologically (re)unifying the people of Japan, Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, re-elected in 2012, cultivated a post-disaster utopian national vision of a "new beautiful country" (*utsukushii kuni he*) built on the semi-mystical concept of *kizuna* as genuine social bonds and relationships based on common past, identity, and destiny (Morris-Suzuki 2017: 180).

For Shinkai's *Kimi no na wa*, Karatsu Rie (2021: 278) recognizes the key motif of *musubi* and its symbol of the braided cord (*kumihimo*) a reference to the utopian narrative of *kizuna* coined by the government and mass media. *Suzume no tojimari* does not contain a symbolism as direct as *musubi*; still, the connection to ancestors, spirituality, mythology, and the Japanese islands as a physical place is emphasized throughout the movie. Sōta's "prayer" against the

earthquake worms approaching through the “doors,” spoken in archaic Japanese, illustrates also an attempt to reconnect with the past and the native (or local) deities:

*Oh gods that have not been seen in a long time
This ground where our distant ancestors were born
The mountains and rivers that we have borrowed from you for so long,
I humbly give them back to you!*
(Own translation)

The movie's premise is that the Japanese people's neglect of abandoned places and their “doors” triggers the earthquake worms. In other words, the worms' attacks are the result of human misbehavior destabilizing a (super)natural balance with acts such as Suzume's accidental moving of the key stone that will turn into Daijin. Such an interpreted correlation between natural disasters and human actions was also observed in the past, for example, after the Great Kanto Earthquake 1923 (Weisenfeld 2012). For 3/11, such a perspective was infamously announced by the past long-term Governor of Tokyo and nationalist conservative Ishihara Shintaro who called 3/11 a “divine punishment” (*tenbatsu*) for the supposed “Westernization” of Japan (Hopson 2013). Even though Ishihara later apologized for this very controversial statement, it expresses a crude interpretation of natural disasters such as earthquakes correlated to the moral misbehavior of humans (*tenkenron*), a worldview that can also be observed in *Suzume no tojimari* (Motegi 2022).

The idea of natural disasters being induced by deities or supernatural creatures has roots in folklore traditions, but became after 3/11 a new national self-portrait, defining Japan as the country uniquely tormented by natural disasters and Japanese people as “experts” on handling such potential disharmony between nature/gods and humans (Castiglioni 2019: 172). As mentioned in the previous section, what is counted as religion, where secularization starts and ends, is not based on determined or static definition, but dynamic process of debate and negotiation in the realms of politics, culture, and society (Rots and Teeuwen 2017). Echoing with such a dynamic understanding of religion, Takahashi Hara (2016) argues that contemporary Japan, in particular since the recent experiences of largescale natural disasters such as 3/11, is witnessing an era of “post-secularity,” in which religious groups and individuals play a distinctive new role in formerly nonreligious settings; for example, by providing religious rituals, Shinto prayers, or exorcism ceremonies for disaster victims to spiritually support them, or by offering chaplaincy often catch-phrased as *kokoro no kea* (care of mind/heart). This development might be seen in correlation to the idea of (new) animism, as the traditional domain of religious actors from Shinto or Buddhist (sometimes also Christian) realms here shifts to sites and narratives, which were originally secularized. In a similar vein, director Shinkai explained in an interview with *Nikkei Asia* that he was struck by the fact that there are ground-breaking ceremonies to spiritually cleanse construction sites (*jichinsai*), but there is no equivalent when it comes to abandoned places to mourn them, such as a funeral in the case of humans (Sekihara 2022). This thought, eventually, inspired the movie's premise and reflects the shallow logics of (new) animism inheriting it.

Tanaka Motoko (2014) forecasted correctly that 3/11 would hugely influence the depiction of apocalyptic disasters in Japanese popular media. Now, one decade later, when we look at the three recent movies of Shinkai, all somehow deal with 3/11 in different ways and, more importantly, with a different degree of directness. In an interview with *The Asahi Shinbun* in 2022, the director admitted that his two last movies, *Kimi no na wa* and *Tenki no ko*, were actually depicting 3/11 through other symbolic catastrophes, namely a crashing comet and heavy rain-induced flooding. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, as a new kind of disaster for Japan's youth, made Shinkai worry about the audience forgetting 3/11 and thus he decided to directly reference in *Suzume no tojimari* for what he just hinted previously (Ohara 2022). Indeed, *Kimi no na wa* reduced 3/11 to an unavoidable but rather unrealistic surrogate catastrophe (a crashing comet), which might have been one reason for its huge success among young people in Japan and abroad, in contrast to, for example, the live-action movie *Shin Gōjira* (2016) that was released in the same year but approached the disaster narrative from a critical perspective on the government, including nuclear menace (Lamarre 2022).

Even though *Suzume no tojimari* directly refers to 3/11 and Fukushima as a central location, the nuclear incident as well as any stance regarding the government are totally absent, making the movie deeply apolitical, at least at first glance. The neglect of the Fukushima Dai'ichi incident and its continuous aftermath of radiated pollution, as well as the story's focus on a mystical quest to save Japan with ancient magic rooting in Shinto and folklore, echoes the national conservative ideology of political leaders such as Abe or Ishihara. The exclusion of potentially controversial aspects of 3/11 and reducing the multilayered disaster to an emotional and highly individual drama of the heroine put this movie in line with *Kimi no na wa*, where, similarly, a natural catastrophe was solved by an engaged individual and magical Shinto-related intervention.

In reality, individual coping strategies with aftermath of 3/11 are complex, as Fukushima activist Kohso Sabu (2022: 79) writes about people's dealing with the nuclear incident:

Fukushima engendered a soup of mixed emotions: grief for the tremendous losses, despair and anxiety for the future, rage against the regime that caused the disaster, and a glimmer of exhilaration over the unknown. However, an examination of the social context exposes to us a bifurcating tendency among the populace: one in favour of sustaining familiar, pre-disaster national conformity and solving problems in unity; the other wanting to confront the event and pull apart the fissures opened by the catastrophe so as to glimpse the unknown.

Suzume no tojimari, although not depicting the nuclear incident, contains both tendencies: It confronts the audience with the event in an emotionally-loaden but rather contextless way, emphasizing national and sociocultural unity. The real-world menace of earthquakes was transferred to the movie's hyperreality where it could be easily solved by a return to ancient mythology and religion, i.e., rediscovering an everlasting Japanese essence, that re-established a “natural” harmony of land, people, and culture. The strategy of coincidentally avoiding any real-world implications was probably a reason for the movie's commercial success,

reflecting a depoliticized mindset, which is very present in contemporary Japan's society and national conservative discourse. In other words, the movie does not disturb the political and social status quo but puts moral responsibility to the individual, following the logic of neoliberalism.

Suzume's "Eastern expedition" and rural ruins as *lieux de mémoire*

In an interview with NHK, Shinkai explained that *Suzume no tojimari* should be a road trip movie first, a journey through present-day Japan marked by population shrinkage and economic decline, where voices of the past echo (NHK 2022). Suzume encounters on her animated dark tourism-like exploration numerous abandoned sites, where "doors" are about to open; all places could be linked to past earthquakes, with some being more infamously remembered (namely, Kobe, Tokyo, and Fukushima) than others (Miyazaki and Ehime).

The first spot are the ruins of an onsen resort town located directly in Suzume's neighborhood in Miyazaki Prefecture, which is of ideological importance as the origin place of Japan's first emperor Jimmu, a descendant of sun goddess Amaterasu. Shinkai explained in an interview that one initial concept of the movie was inspired by Jimmu's "Eastern expedition route" (*tōsei no rūto*) (CoMix Wave Films 2023: 202). The legendary Eastern expedition was a military campaign to conquer areas of indigenous people in today's Hiroshima and Okayama Prefecture. Jimmu and his ancient war became romanticized since the Meiji era in collective memory as an essential part of national history, also exploited by the tourism industry in, for instance Miyazaki and Wakayama Prefecture, where tours reminiscent of Jimmu's campaign are promoted (Yamamura 2022). As in Jimmu's case, Suzume's way to the East (re-)establishes a mythological connection of Japanese land, people, and culture.

In Ehime, the door is located in an abandoned school. The next stop, Kobe, experienced a major earthquake in 1995, the Great Hanshin Earthquake, and the door there is located at an abandoned amusement park nearby. In Tokyo, the door is hidden in a castle's gate ruins (probably inspired by the Akamon—red gate—at the University of Tokyo) in the underground near Ochanomizu; here was, as Sōta explains, the second key stone placed to stop the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. Finally, Suzume visits the ruins of her old home in Fukushima, destroyed by 3/11.

These sites, where the "doors" are located, coincidentally reflect different aspects of contemporary postgrowth Japan, which domestic viewers likely recognize and whose familiarity contributes to the movie's hyperreality. The abandoned onsen town and the amusement park ruins are typical relics of the bubble era (late 1980s, early 1990s), when former local hot spring towns and their small inns were transformed into large resort facilities, and new amusement parks were built in rather rural areas to create new touristic resources. While some of these sites are still in usage, the number of those being abandoned over time is likewise considerable. These "ruins of consumption" (Lam 2018), which we see in *Suzume no tojimari*, are symbols of Japan's prosperous past now

largely gone. Similarly, closed schools are a common phenomenon in the countryside, due to the lack of children in the age of population shrinkage, and due to the amalgamation of municipalities, especially during the 2000s, which led to the merging of public schools with many buildings left unused. Suzume's old home represents the countless destroyed houses and towns that were never rebuilt after disasters such as 3/11. The hidden castle, lastly, refers to one key motif of the movie: the neglected past and its culture. The novelization of the movie mentions this place being located under the Imperial Palace (Motegi 2022); a fact that underscores the constant mythological references in the story.

The ruin sites are portals to the movie's otherworld named *tokoyo*; the term derives from the *Kojiki* (712) and is a mysterious realm where *kami* and ancestral spirits live as immortals. When closing the "doors," some of these memories appear, for example, as voices in the onsen town and in Fukushima, and also as images of shadow-like faceless humans at the school and the amusement park. The voices and images express the mundane usage of these facilities, while in Fukushima also the grief for Suzume's lost mother and the mundane dialogs of other disaster victims just before 3/11 are verbalized. Historian Pierre Nora (1989) coined the term *lieux de mémoire* for places, such as the sites of historical battles such as Verdun for World War I, that serve to construct collective memory and a unified, i.e., national, identity. Nora argues that any object or even humans (historians, witnesses of events) might become *lieux de mémoire*, but I want to stay here close to the literary meaning of the term, as places or sites; although one could argue that Suzume's child chair can also be seen as a *lieu de mémoire* in the broader meaning. The aspect of forgetting, of events and their memory getting lost in the stream of time, is one important reason for establishing *lieux de mémoire*, as Nora (1989: 19) explains: "The most fundamental purpose of the *lieu de mémoire* is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial."

The ruin sites visited in *Suzume no tojimari* with their "doors" to the timeless otherworld can be seen in exactly such a context, and the forgetting about them and so about humans' relation to the native deities as causing the earthquakes. They conserve and immortalize memories, while most of them are related to national disasters such as 3/11, the Great Hanshin and Kanto Earthquakes. These events and their voices can be remembered there, as testimonies not only of the tragedy itself but also a *pars pro toto* of the nation itself suffering at these times. Thus, earthquake ruins and their "doors," serve as *lieux de mémoire*, as manifestations of the past and the ancestors' experience to recall and reestablish national history and essence. Suzume's dark tourism-like road trip includes the places of the three most infamous earthquakes in the last 100 years in Japan and so fosters the commemoration of these sites as characterized by these events in the collective memory, as well as the image of the Japanese people being characterized by natural disasters, or put in the simple formula: "Japan is Japan because there are earthquakes" (Castiglioni 2019: 172).



Figure 6: Blurred pages of March 11 in Suzume's old diary. (©2022 Suzume no tojimari sakusei iinkai).

Suzume's individual memories of 3/11 were, however, forgotten or neglected. Although she remembers her mother because of the child chair that she made for her, the events of 3/11 just return to her when she finds her old diary in Fukushima with the blurred pages of the time starting on March 11 (Figure 6), symbolizing her lost memory and trauma of the 3/11 events, until the time when she was adopted by her aunt and the pages turn into colorful images again. This confrontation and remembering, finally, helps her to find the "door" through which she went in the past. By entering there again, the finale can begin, in which the (super)natural order is restored by the deities Daijin and Sadaijin taking again their role as key stones.

The otherworld in the movie is described as a place where time doesn't exist, i.e., past and future events are simultaneously occurring. It is, one can argue, a *lieu de mémoire* of Japan itself. One part of this otherworld is supposedly Suzume's home and Fukushima sometime after 3/11, with a boat swept on the top of a house, destroyed buildings, overall chaos, but also many parts of the landscape are overgrown with plants. Such images, where ruins of civilization and plants are merging, are, according to the movie's art director Tanji Takumi, meant to combine a dark atmosphere with beauty, where memories of daily life are floating but at the same time things are reduced to their physical existence (CoMix Wave Films 2023: 198). They are, additionally, the simulation of an eternal Japan (i.e., a unity of land, people, and culture) based on the mythological concept of *tokoyo* and echoed in the national conservative discourse.

However, there is also another side of the otherworld, where a disaster is just taking place, in which a city is burning down while the earthquake worms are raging. The depiction, somewhat, resembles the images of the mass fires after the Great Kanto Earthquake destroying Tokyo. One might interpret that for the sensitivity of the targeted mass audience, such a depiction was chosen instead of authentic images of flooded places after 3/11. The otherworld without

time, however, fits to the thought of Japanese people genuinely bound to natural disasters, with the disaster of 1923 and the aftermath landscape of 3/11 being mingled with each other. When the battle against the earthquake worms is won, there is an overlaying of the burning landscape of the otherworld and the pre-3/11 landscape, symbolizing that at least in the simulation of the otherworld, 3/11 was made undone, or that another similar disaster was prevented. The same technique of overlaying is used earlier, when Suzume visits the ruins of her old home; the possibilities of animation allow a hyperreal visualization of this *lieu de mémoire*—depicted as place and as memory at the same time (Figure 7).

The visited ruins with "doors" in *Suzume in tojimari* are, besides the underground door in Tokyo, located in rather rural areas. Since 3/11, the concept of the countryside in Japan has changed, as Fabio Ramelli (2019: 14) remarks: "The countryside is no longer the idyllic and idealized heart of Japanese traditional culture but a boring place subject to disasters; it is the metropolis that has the power to solve those disasters and keep Japan alive." The strong disparity between center and periphery, i.e., Tokyo and rural places such as Fukushima (Kainuma 2011), is not a new phenomenon, but very present in popular culture, such as Shinkai's recent movies. In this sense, *Kimi no na wa* was harshly criticized for reproducing a conservative and gendered worldview of feminizing the countryside (Karatsu 2021).

Even though *Suzume no tojimari* might be in this aspect a bit more complex, as the heroine Suzume is the center of the story and the cursed Sōta as a child chair needs her continuous support, it is yet remarkable that again the female protagonist is coming from the periphery while the male one is from Tokyo. Likewise, even though Suzume is the active main character, the guidance by her male companion and their collaboration is essential for the finale. Yet, most of the supporting characters are female and from rather rural places throughout the movie. These characters are all rather simple people with low social prestige: Suzume's aunt, the girl of a small rural inn in Ehime, the female snack bar owner



Figure 7: Suzume's destroyed home overlaid with her memory of it. (©2022 Suzume no tojimari sakusei iinkai).

in Kobe, and—as an exception in terms of gender—the unambitious student friend of Sōta in Tokyo. In a similar vein, heterosexual nuclear families are absent throughout the entire movie: Suzume is the child of a single-mother, then adopted by her very same single aunt, the snack owner is a single-mother, also her male companion Sōta has no family ties besides his grandfather. These stories of new family patterns and young people's precarity, however, remain on a rather superficial level without a critique on the neoliberal society; in addition, in this regard, the movie remains deeply apolitical and sets responsibilities to the individuals for their fate, not the welfare state or its politics. This is a common phenomenon in the recent Japanese discourse on precarity, in which seemingly authentic stories are represented as emotionally moving narratives for entertaining consumers, ultimately serving the capitalist logics without engaging into profound criticism on the system or society itself (Penney 2024). However, the people living in these simple and precarious conditions prove to be warm-hearted allies to the heroine; besides the magical inference in the movie, social bonds are presented as the more rational antidote for coping with disaster and decline.

Conclusions

As the latest natural disaster to date when penning this essay, on New Year's Day 2024, the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture in the middle part of Honshu was hit by the strongest local earthquake in over 100 years. More than 600 people lost their lives, some 10,000 houses were destroyed, and their inhabitants forced into shelters. Such events rise up and dominate the news but are soon forgotten (or neglected) in the public discourse, while those affected by these disasters often face hardship and loss for the rest of their lives. It is, no doubt, a difficult task to transfer these dark realities into pop-cultural media while paying tribute to their effects and aftermath in a worthy manner.

In the introduction to their edited volume *Literature after Fukushima*, Linda Flores and Barbara Geilhorn (2023: 2) write:

As with atomic bomb literature, the question of legitimacy in writing about traumatic events also came to the fore after March 11: Should writing about 3.11 be restricted to those who experienced it firsthand, or perhaps to those who were directly impacted by it? Could those who were not present at the disaster comment on it with any sense of moral authority?

These questions, of course, need complex and nuanced answers. Similarly, when it comes to the role of religion in relation to disaster and trauma, there is no simple right or wrong. For example, ethnographer Morimoto Ryo (2023) describes impressively how *en* (destiny or chance to meet certain people) and rituals such as offerings or the planting of mystical seeds supposedly passed down since the writing of *Nihon shoki* (720) helped the people of the “most disaster-stricken municipality in Fukushima” to cope with their trauma and the stigma caused by 3/11 and its aftermath.

In the recent decade, director Shinkai has become the creator of disaster anime. In opposition to his first two movies dealing with catastrophe—*Kimi no na wa*, where a comet substituted real natural disasters, and *Tenki no ko*, where climate change became fictionalized to represent a flood catastrophe similar to 3/11—*Suzume no tojimari* is comparatively grounded in real-life events. This time, Shinkai explicitly incorporates the Tohoku earthquake of 2011 into the narrative, no longer using metaphors, which the audience might understand anyway. Suzume is from Fukushima, has lost her mother through the disaster and had to relocate to Miyazaki; moreover, because of her traumatic experience, she neglected and forgot what had happened in Tohoku. Similarly, many young people in Japan seem to barely remember the disaster and that its reconstruction efforts are still ongoing. In a positive sense, one can argue that *Suzume no tojimari* keeps the memory of 3/11 in popular culture alive and so reaches the targeted younger generations who may not remember the events.

In an interview, Shinkai explained that in the scene when Suzume and Sōta's friend from Tokyo arrive in the ruins of Fukushima, the director wanted to express the different points of view between persons who were affected by the earthquake

and those who were not (*tōjisha* versus *hitōjisha*) (CoMix Wave Films 2023: 204). Standing next to each other on a hill and gazing on the landscapes of ruins overgrown with greenery, the unrelated companion comments with surprise: “Isn’t it a beautiful place?” (*Konna kirei na basho dattan naa?*). Suzume, seemingly irritated and stumbling, answers: “What . . . here it’s beau . . . ti . . . ful?” (*Ee . . . koko ga, ki . . . re . . . i . . . ?*) (Shinkai and CoMix Wave Films 2023: 721–22). The director further mentions that these depictions of post-disaster landscapes are inspired by his own travel to the region shortly after 3/11, seeing how between destroyed houses the sun and the sea were shimmering (CoMix Wave Films 2023: 204).

Ultimately, the debate on how and by whom the stories of 3/11 and similar catastrophes should be told, remains important but complex, more than one decade after the events, and will continue in the future. In how far the movie in question provides an appropriate dealing with 3/11 and its aftermath, is disputable. For instance, Motegi (2022) critiques the lack of mourning for and remembering of the dead caused by the earthquakes and questions in how far Suzume serves as a suitable proxy for someone who has experienced the 3/11 events. Similar to my viewpoint, Motegi contests the ideological undertones of the movie’s story, calling them a “distorted spiritual system” (*ibutsu na supirichuaru kikō*) and a “pseudo-‘State Shinto’ framework” (*giji-‘Kokka Shintō’-teki wakugumi*). Motegi, furthermore, links Suzume and Sōta as “door closers” secretly protecting and serving the Japanese people to the recent interpretation of the Emperor, who is represented as constantly but often unnoticeably caring and working for the nation.

Suzume’s hyperreal dark tourism-like journey is loosely retelling Shinto mythology (the heroine succeeding in Jimmu’s footsteps) and likewise liberally mixing various inspirations from folklore traditions, so-called new animism, and references to earthquake history to create a very self-consciously Japanese anime. Similar to Shinkai’s earlier movies *Kimi no na wa* and *Tenki no ko*, also in *Suzume no tojimari*, a fantastic solution, a *deus ex machina*, saves Japan. This *deus ex machina* happened because the heroine overcomes her personal trauma, and, more importantly, reestablishes a magical unity of land, people, and culture. What has saved Japan in the movie was that Suzume rediscovered and embraced her mythological and spiritual heritage by placing key stones at the right position, just as the ancestors have done it. This simplistic logic somewhat resonates national conservative narratives, such as Ishihara’s infamous indication that the Japanese people’s loss of culture caused 3/11 as “divine punishment,” or Abe’s vision of a “beautiful country” based on eternal bonds (*kizuna*).

With this cheap and somewhat unsatisfying plot twist, especially when considering how much the movie references real-life disasters such as 3/11, *Suzume no tojimari* exploits disasters and rural decline for consumerist entertainment and questionable ideological messages. The movie turns out to be an escapism, using catastrophes and their aftermath as mere plot devices, being in line with the narrative of unpredictability grounded in Japan’s “systems of irresponsibility” after 3/11 (Hopson 2013). In this way, the movie manages, in a somewhat sophisticated way, to be both

apolitical and political at the same time: apolitical when it comes to claims of accountability or responsibility for disaster causes and relief, and political for mirroring concepts from the national-conservative ideological discourse and for burdening the individual to endure and overcome crises.

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