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Timo Thelen

Kanazawa

## Disaster and Salvation in the Japanese Periphery

### “The Rural” in Shinkai Makoto’s *Kimi no na wa* (*Your Name*)

**Abstract:** “Your Name” (*Kimi no na wa*) became the most popular movie of 2016 in Japan and also attracted the attention of anime movie fans worldwide. The body swap story of a rural shrine maiden and a metropolitan high school boy deals with their struggle to save a rural town and its inhabitants from a crashing comet. I argue that “Your Name” and its overwhelming success should be interpreted from a sociocultural perspective, especially in consideration of the Tohoku triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown) of March 2011. The movie’s alternate storyline creates a simulation that strongly alludes to real events, but in which the national tragedy is ultimately prevented. This, in turn, aims at achieving an emotional catharsis for the Japanese viewers who remember their own collective trauma after facing the sudden and devastating catastrophe of 3/11.

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## 1. Introduction

Shinkai Makoto's<sup>1</sup> *Kimi no na wa* (*Your Name*, 2016) became the most popular movie of its release year 2016 in Japan, topping the national cinema rankings for nearly half-a-year, and gained the status of the most commercially successful anime movie of all time, replacing the globally beloved Miyazaki Hayao's *Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*, 2001). It attracted the interest of anime movie fans worldwide, especially in China and Korea. The body-swapping time travel narrative of rural shrine maiden Mitsuha and metropolitan high school boy Taki offers a romance story and at the same time a climactic struggle to save a rural town from its inevitable destruction by a crashing comet.

Noh has analyzed the movie's depiction and effects of nostalgia by discussing the binary of local/traditional/Japanese and urban/modern/Western. She interprets Taki's and the audience's rediscovery of the rural Japanese past symbolized by Mitsuha's spiritual rituals as an aspect of "healing" (*iyashikei*).<sup>2</sup> However, I believe that there is another important aspect of the movie that deserves investigation, namely the decline of rural communities in Japan and the triple disaster (earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown) of March 2011 in the Tohoku Region (also named 3/11 in this article). I will analyze the "healing" of *Kimi no na wa* in relation to the national trauma of the 2011 catastrophe and its aftermath. Furthermore, I will argue that *Kimi no na wa* offers a medial reconciliation with the recent catastrophe similar to the way that some fantasy movies supposedly "healed" the Japanese audience from its war and nuclear attack trauma in the past.<sup>3</sup>

In my interpretation, the idea of "healing" through a movie means that the viewers might experience emotional catharsis by watching it. In late 1970s, Scheff argued that audiences viewing disaster movies seem to experience "distress rather than catharsis."<sup>4</sup> However, more recent scholars have adopted the idea of emotional catharsis to interpret the audience's emotional involvement. For instance, Tan has described the reception of television as follows:

In other words, not only do they [fantasies evoked by television drama] contribute to a catharsis but the emotion-laden symbolic representations that accompany television viewing could in themselves be a motive for watching the programs concerned.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Japanese names, this article applies Japan's common system of family name followed by the personal name.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Noh 2017: 50.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Napier 1993: 332.

<sup>4</sup> Scheff 1979: 142.

<sup>5</sup> Tan 2013: 26.

Thus, an emotional catharsis is not the central nor sole effect of a movie, but should be interpreted in the context of the related symbols and sociocultural context. Wiley argued similarly:

Art and religion give symbolic solutions to problems, and these may provide partial relief or catharsis. The movie pattern of strict form and loose content is a powerful means for building symbolic solutions. In other words the movie in some way solves the problem, or even stacks of problems.<sup>6</sup>

This latter aspect is particularly important for my analysis of *Kimi no na wa* since the allusions to the triple disaster of 2011 and its symbolic resolution in the movie offered the viewers a way to cope with the “national trauma”<sup>7</sup> after the real catastrophe.

## 2. The Urban and the Rural Spheres

The main female character of *Kimi no na wa* is the high school girl and shrine maiden Mitsuha who lives in the fictive mountain town of Itomori (Fig. 1), which administratively belongs to the actually existing Hida City in Gifu Prefecture. Her storyline takes place in 2013, some weeks before her home town is destroyed by a crashing comet, and ca. 500 inhabitants are killed. On some mornings, she awakes in the body of Taki, a boy of the same age who lives in Tokyo in the year 2016 (the movie’s year of release); in exchange, he sometimes awakes in her body. As both come to understand this mutual body swapping, they communicate with each other via notes and mobile phone messages. One day, the body swapping is suddenly interrupted. Taki then attempts to solve this mystery by traveling to Hida City. There, he learns that Mitsuha had died in the comet crash of 2013. He searches for a hidden mountain shrine where Mitsuha had placed a bottle of *kuchikamizake*; this is rice wine she produced in a traditional ritual, in which she chews the rice and then spits it into a ceramic bottle, which is then closed so that it ferments into alcohol after some years. When Taki drinks from that bottle, they once again swap their bodies and evacuate Mitsuha’s home town from the crashing comet. In this alternate storyline, the catastrophe doesn’t cost human lives. Eight years after the comet’s crash, Mitsuha and Taki accidentally meet again in Tokyo, now as adults, and seem to remember each other.

Mitsuha and her counterpart Taki appear as cliché representations of their different sociocultural environments. Taki’s urban environment is easily recognizable through iconic Tokyo spots, such as Shinjuku Station or Tokyo Sky Tree. The lifestyle seems highly influenced by Western consumer ideals like clothes and, more importantly, food. Taki works part-time at an Italian restaurant, and his classmates predominately consume Western fast food. The family bonds seem weak and community is always related to school or work. Only in one scene does Taki’s father

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<sup>6</sup> Wiley 2003: 183.

<sup>7</sup> DiNitto 2014: 342.

appear, a stereotypical white-collar worker (*sararii man*) who only speaks a few distant words to him at the breakfast table. Taki's social life centers around his classmates and his older female shift leader, whom he has a crush on. Tokyo basically seems like a rather cold and rough place (e.g., some youngsters menace him at his part-time job), but at least friendship compensates for the competitive living conditions in the overloaded metropolis. When Taki suddenly wants to travel to Hida alone in order to search for Mitsuha, a close friend and his female shift leader resolve to accompany him for support.



**Fig. 1: The townscape of Itomori, a mix of Japanese and Western architecture with some rice paddy fields on the left side. (*Kimi no na wa*: 00:32:13; © CoMix Wave Films)**

In comparison, Mitsuha's rural life largely depends on the local community and family-related activities. As her mother passed away long before, her strict but jovial grandmother takes care of Mitsuha and her younger sister, while her father is the mayor of the small lakeside mountain town. The grandmother is in charge of the local shrine and regards Mitsuha and her sister as the potential successors of its old traditions like producing *kuchikamizake* or pilgrimage to a related shrine deep in the mountains. She also teaches the two girls a traditional local weaving technique; the frequently dropped Japanese term *musubu*, which can mean both "to connect" in the abstract sense (e.g., tradition or love) or "to put things together" by techniques like weaving, is a major topos throughout the whole movie. Besides these family or shrine activities, Mitsuha spends a lot of time with her friends from school, much like Taki, but due to their spacial limitations, these friends have been her neighbors since childhood. Mitsuha complains: "I don't wanna be in this town anymore! It's too small, too much agriculture, directly after finishing high school I wanna move to Tokyo!"<sup>8</sup> She and a female friend count the negative aspects of living in Itomori:

<sup>8</sup> *Kimi no na wa*: 00:10:56–00:11:04.

“Only one train in two hours!”

“The convenience store closes at 9 pm!”

“No bookstore, no dentist!”

“But two pubs [for middle-aged men]!”

“No jobs!”

“Young women don’t come here [to marry the local men]!”<sup>9</sup>

The ideological binary of urban and rural living in Japan, as in many so-called “developed countries,” is deeply rooted in the public discourse and often depicted in popular culture. For instance, the Studio Ghibli directors Takahata Isao and Miyazaki Hayao often portrayed very aesthetic and idealized rural landscapes in their oeuvre. Takahata’s *Omohide poro poro* (*Only Yesterday*, 1991) tells the story of a young woman from Tokyo, who finds her great love and personal fulfillment during a trip to a rural village. His movie *Heisei tanuki gassen ponpoko* (*Pom Poko*, 1994) deals with a pack of raccoon dogs that fight against the urbanization of suburban Tokyo, which is destroying their livelihood and simultaneously contributing to the disappearance of religious and spiritual traditions in the modern society.<sup>10</sup> The by far more internationally renowned Miyazaki employed similar topics in his movies. Regarding the depiction of rural Japan, *Tonari no Totoro* (*My Neighbor Totoro*, 1988) in particular established iconic images of how a perfect Japanese rural village is considered to have looked in early postwar Japan.

In its modern variation, the highly romanticized medial and ideological representation of the Japanese countryside is based on both Western sociology like Ferdinand Tönnies and David Riesman and on Japanese intellectuals like Yanagita Kunio, the pioneer of native folklore studies. Yanagita interpreted the countryside as the spiritual home of the—as he believes—homogenous Japanese people and their unique culture. Such an archetypical rural place is commonly described using the term *furusato* (literally: old village), which can refer to one’s individual home as well as the ideological representation of a national origin (similar to the German word *Heimat*). It contains quintessential landscape features such as wooded mountains, a river, irrigation ponds, rice paddy fields, and thatch-roof houses.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the cities that emerged since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, which are usually considered as anonymous and cold, a *furusato* indicates features such as strong social bonds and family networks, lived traditions and religious customs.

Reconsidering this sociocultural context, Mitsuha’s hometown Itomori might appear as a typical depiction of *furusato* with aesthetic elements like green mountains and old houses. However, Mitsuha and her female best friend are tired of the town’s backwardness and long for metropolitan life. Moreover, the community bonds and

<sup>9</sup> *Kimi no na wa*: 00:11:11–00:11:22.

<sup>10</sup> Thelen 2012: 44.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Robertson 1988: 494.

family networks seem just as difficult as in Tokyo at some points. Mizuho's father, for example, has a rather distant and conceited attitude toward his daughter, and some of her classmates actually find *kuchikamizake* embarrassing and obsolete. The ceremony of producing the rice wine only attracts a few spectators, while the flute and drum music for the ritual comes out of an old radio. The romanticization and fetishization of the "rural" is clearly mocked in *Kimi no na wa*. The little sister even suggests selling *kuchikamizake* in Tokyo, which Mitsuha rejects after imagining herself in a ridiculous commercial for it (Fig. 2). I consider this scene a parody of urban people's obsession with *urusato*-themed rural goods or their consumption, which has indeed become a commercial trend since the early 1990s.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 2: Mitsuha imaging herself in a commercial for *kuchikamizake*. (*Kimi no na wa*: 00:16:56; © CoMix Wave Films)

When compared with the movies of Takahata and Miyazaki mentioned above, the depiction of rural Japan remains rather neutral in *Kimi no na wa*. Life in Itomori is not more desirable than life in Tokyo per se, although there are aesthetic landscapes and old traditions. Mitsuha dreams about living in Tokyo and eventually does so in the end of the alternate storyline, and she has very understandable reasons for her decision. Apart from naïvely adoring the Western food available in Tokyo's cafés and restaurants, she also criticizes the inconvenient aspects of rural life like limited public transport and medical service. Furthermore, when Taki inhabits Mitsuha's body, he also does not recognize any merits of living in the countryside. Interestingly, he only discovers Itomori Town in Tokyo by accident in an exhibition on rural photography titled "Nostalgia," which he attends during a date with his female shift leader. Ultimately, *urusato* appears as an urban nostalgic vision of the lost countryside, but not as a discursive topic inside the periphery. Although both the rural and the urban spheres contain more or less evident stereotypical features

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Creighton 1997: 249–250.

in their depiction, I consider the relatively balanced portrayal of both sides a strong point of the movie, which can also be regarded as one reason for its huge popularity. I will further discuss this aspect in the following part.

### 3. The Peripheries in Distress

Most economically developed countries in the world face a strong imbalance between urban and rural areas, as wealth, power, and knowledge accumulate in the centers. In Japan, however, this issue has assumed enormous dimensions in the last decades due to the quickly aging population. The urban migration of youths, weak economy and infrastructure, and the over-aging of the inhabitants produce various challenges to the survival of local communities. The national discourse established the negative expression “settlements on the edge” (*genkai shūraku*) to name these depopulated rural municipalities where more than half on the inhabitants are 65 years or older. According to a governmental survey conducted in 2006, there were about 8,000 “settlements on the edge” in Japan, a quarter of which might disappear in the near future.<sup>13</sup> Even if this trope has become somewhat over-used in recent years to refer to the dilemma of struggling rural municipalities, it illustrates that this structural issue has garnered national attention in contemporary Japanese society.

In *Kimi no na wa*, the rural town of Itomori seems to face some typical issues of the Japanese periphery. For instance, Mitsuha complains about the town’s inconvenience and wants to move away as soon as possible. Many domestic viewers may relate to her experience, as they used to spend their entire or at least parts of their lives in a similar rural environment somewhere in Japan. This may also be true for those viewers in other East Asian countries where the movie gained much popularity. The romantic image of a *furusato* barely appeals to the younger generation that experiences the disadvantages of living in the countryside.

A crucial symptom of rural depopulation is the abolition of local shrine festivals, which often coincidentally means the loss of the social bonds that maintain a village community.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the influential folklore scholar Yanagita Kunio considered the shrine village festival (*matsuri*) the essence of Japanese culture.<sup>15</sup> In *Kimi no na wa*, the comet crashes directly into the shrine festival, annihilating the village’s inner core. It hits and destroys the rural sphere at the moment least expected and worst imaginable, when its old spiritual traditions are being celebrated. The depiction of a village festival at the narrative climax, just before the village vanishes, unites *Kimi no na wa* with many other anime movies set in rural Japan, like *Niji-iro hotaru* (*Rainbow Fireflies*, 2011) for instance.

Still, *Kimi no na wa* features many more references to the current situation of rural communities in Japan and their issues. In an early scene (Fig. 3), Mitsuha’s father

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Matanle/Rausch 2011: 25–26.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Thelen 2015: 183.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Morris-Suzuki 1995: 768.



stands next to his financial supporters from a local construction company and speaks ambitiously of his plans for “town-building” (*machi-zukuri*) in front of a couple of distracted people, as he is campaigning for reelection: “Thus, for the realization of secure and safe town-building, we first need more than anything local financial improvement for settlement revitalization projects.”<sup>16</sup> The caricature-like scene implies corruption in local politics, which surely reminds the Japanese audience of their own frustration with local politicians and their empty promises for rural revitalization. Since the 1980s, the central government implemented so-called “(home)town-building” (also called *furusato-zukuri* or *furusato-sōsei*) in its agenda,<sup>17</sup> establishing a long-lasting political narrative that local initiatives can stop the decline of rural areas. Even if the ideological and cultural impact of “(home)town-building” lasts until today, many people became skeptical or even disillusioned with it.<sup>18</sup> In *Kimi no na wa*, the spectators of Mitsuha’s father’s speech comment in their local dialect: “He will be elected again anyway,” “Actually [he’s] sprinkling [money to his allies], his talk is just about this,” and “The major and the boss of the construction enterprise are good together like their children [Mitsuha and her classmate] are.”<sup>19</sup>

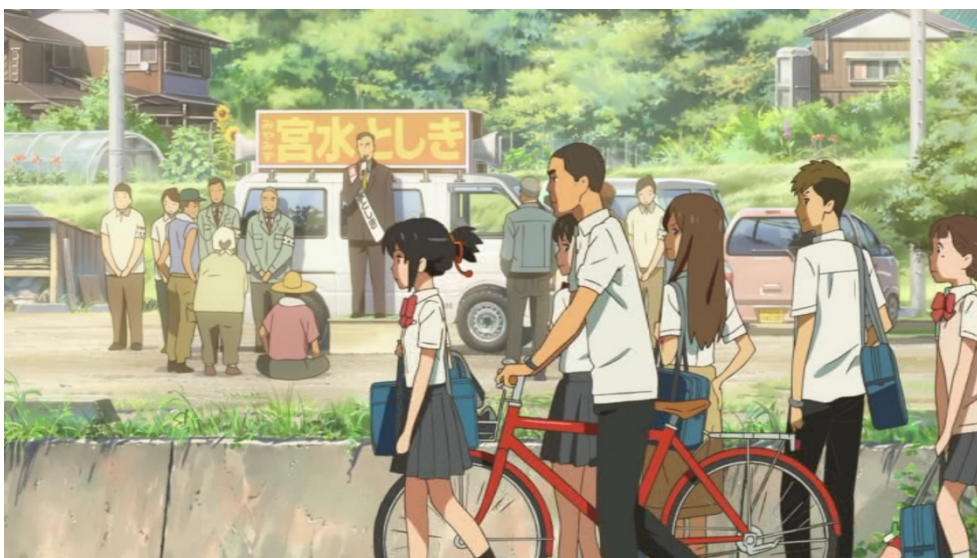


Fig. 3: Mitsuha passes by, embarrassed by her father’s speech. (*Kimi no na wa*: 00:08:30; © CoMix Wave Films)

<sup>16</sup> *Kimi no na wa*: 00:08:00–00:08:12.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Robertson 1988: 504–505.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Thelen 2015: 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Kimi no na wa*: 00:08:16–00:08:28.

There is actually a common belief that the Japanese central government as well as local politicians on the prefectural level largely ignored the urgent issues and structural changes in contemporary Japan's rural areas while focusing on their own interests. Moreover, the exploitation of the peripheries for the benefit of the centers further perpetuated the disparities between urban and rural areas. For instance, Kainuma provocatively called the installation of dangerous energy technology like nuclear power plants in the Tohoku region "internal colonialism" (*uchi he no coronaizēshon*);<sup>20</sup> one of these nuclear power plants is Fukushima Daiichi, which in 2011 produced the greatest nuclear incident and "moral panic" since Chernobyl.<sup>21</sup> This catastrophe also illustrated the profound imbalance of power and safety between center and periphery. The dangerous technology that supports the development of the urban areas is built in the rural backlands, near those who are already in a less favored position in the sociocultural hierarchy.

*Kimi no na wa* does not directly relate to the Tohoku triple disaster, but many allusions are evident. Similar to the earthquake and the tsunami, the crashing comet proves an inevitable and unpredictable natural disaster for which no serious preparations or countermeasures were possible. The brief images of destruction in the movie look similar to those of Tohoku because the comet produces a huge wave from the lake that destroys the town like a tsunami; I will come back to that point later. The main male character Taki, located in the center Tokyo, had not heard of the catastrophe before he traveled to the periphery. He represents a typical inhabitant of the center who barely cares about things outside of the dominant urban sphere. At the moment when the comet crashed into the rural town, he was on a date in Tokyo watching how the comet crossed the night sky, adoring its beauty and not thinking of its consequences. Later, when he learns about the tragedy, he must reconstruct what has happened from a local library and encounters Mitsuha's name in the list of Itomori's deceased inhabitants. Thanks to their fantastic spiritual connection, he got to know this destroyed town and its people. Similarly, the Tohoku triple disaster probably made many urban Japanese reconsider the periphery where the catastrophe occurred for the first time, attempting to imagine what was lost by consuming individual stories of those who were affected.

Looking at other anime movies from recent decades, it seems the countryside is often in danger of destruction or already vanished. Miyazaki's *Tonari no Totoro* is staged in a rural village of the 1950s, shortly before the massive and rapid urbanization of Japan started. Takahata's *Heisei tanuki gassen ponpoko* (1994) deals with the urbanization of rural landscapes based on the real new town projects for suburban Tokyo. Also, other anime movies from the early 21<sup>st</sup> century like *Miyori no mori* (*Miyori's Forest*, 2007) or *Nijiho hotaru* (2011) discuss how the countryside—its environment, its people, and their traditions—are menaced by the interests of the urban areas. In both movies, a village community faces a dam construction project that will ultimately destroy their home. In the first movie, the teenage girl Miyori

<sup>20</sup> Kainuma 2011: 325–328.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Cleveland 2014: 522.

from Tokyo intervenes in the dam's construction with the help of supernatural creatures. In the other movie, the teenage boy Yuta from Tokyo is able to nostalgically experience the last shrine festival in a village before its relocation, thanks to time travel. As a common point of these four movies, the destruction of the countryside is always human-made or, more accurately, initiated by those in the urban centers who do not care about the countryside, the rural people, or the environment.

In *Kimi no na wa*, interestingly, the destruction of the rural sphere derives from a higher, non-human universe. Like Tohoku's earthquake and tsunami, the crashing comet in the movie was ultimately beyond human control. Of course, in the Tohoku region, there were several means prepared against natural catastrophe, but the dimensions of the triple disaster exceeded the worst forecasts: killing ca. 16,000 people (ca. 2,000 still missing) and damaging ca. one million houses. Japan-based sociologist Cleveland states:

(...) the Japanese government's crisis management system was tested beyond imagining by the tsunami, which wiped out entire villages along the coast of Tohoku, and subjected their disaster relief services to mass death and community destruction on a scale not seen since World War II.<sup>22</sup>

The Tohoku triple disaster is often considered not only as a regional, but as a national catastrophe that simultaneously unified the nation in suffering and mourning. DiNitto argues: "March 2011 has clearly risen to the level of national trauma, not just because of the scale of the disaster, but because it has been socially constructed as such."<sup>23</sup> For instance, for the release of Miyazaki's first movie after 3/11 *Kokuriko-zaka kara* (*From Up on Poppy Hill*, 2011), the director shed tears during a press conference and explained that his team had to finish this movie in dedication to Tohoku.<sup>24</sup> Such statements of consolation were common in the public and media discourse after the tragedy, while slogans like "*Ganbare Nippon!*" (Stay strong Japan!) fostered the importance of mourning and staying together under the national umbrella for Japanese citizens. I will reflect on the ideological notion of the triple disaster and its medial catharsis, which in my opinion also played a major role in *Kimi no na wa*, in the next part.

#### 4. Disaster, Trauma, and Emotional Catharsis

DiNitto analyzed how in post-3/11 literature individual stories of the catastrophe eventually established a collective national identity as a "we Japanese" suffering and being traumatized.<sup>25</sup> In *Kimi no na wa*, the individual tragedy of Mitsuha also turns into a representation of all inhabitants of the fictive place Itomori Town and maybe even rural Japan as a whole. Her story offers not only Taki, but also the audience a

<sup>22</sup> Cleveland 2014: 530.

<sup>23</sup> DiNitto 2014: 342.

<sup>24</sup> Furukuwa/Denison 2015: 230.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. DiNitto 2014: 356.

kind of identification with and connection to a catastrophe far away from them. The movie's nationalist undertone establishes a sense of unification: Mitsuha stands *pars pro toto* for all the inhabitants of a typical rural Japanese town, whose catastrophe resembles that of the Tohoku region. In contrast to the triple disaster, Mitsuha can ultimately be saved, and thus the movie provides a moment of "healing," i.e. the fantasy of salvation from an inevitable natural catastrophe as devastating as 3/11.

The so-called "healing genre" (*iyashi* or *iyashi-kei* in Japanese) has grown into a new and long-lasting trend in Japanese advertising and consumerism since the 1990s.<sup>26</sup> Various goods and service offers began to promise relaxation, stress relief, or better health conditions for exhausted consumers, targeting young or middle-aged urban women in particular. Even if the "healing industry" might be seen as a global trend in "developed countries" in the last decades, its manifestation in contemporary Japan seems particularly strong; for instance, literature like the popular novels of Yoshimoto Banana are usually labeled as "healing."<sup>27</sup> Also anime movies like *Tonari no Totoro* might be regarded as possessing a certain capacity for "healing."<sup>28</sup>

Denison and Furukawa argue that "notions of 'healing' after the 3.11 disasters became closely enmeshed with consumption and industrial production cultures."<sup>29</sup> They quote several examples of "healing" media content which were published closely after the 3/11. I also position *Kimi no na wa*, which was released five years later, in this context. In the triple disaster's initial aftermath, scenes of destruction by tsunami or people drowning were cut from newly aired TV anime series or recently produced manga volumes.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, *Kimi no na wa* also avoids any visual exploitation of catastrophic images. When Taki discovers the devastated landscape of Itomori Town, only a panorama shot and three detailed images of broken concrete on the shore or a train off-the-rail are shown. The catastrophe itself is only depicted for about 25 seconds: first the comet's crashing explosion and then details of a tsunami-like wave that destroys a bridge (Fig. 4). No explicit images like dead bodies appear; nonetheless, the slight visual allusions to the catastrophe of 2011 are obvious.

In an interview with The New York Times, Japanologist Hikawa Ryusuke explained, "Many people have the guilt of, 'Oh, there must have been something that we could have done.' That is now part of the Japanese psyche."<sup>31</sup> In its alternate storyline, *Kimi no na wa* offers the chance to avoid the deaths of hundreds of people, even if the rural town, culture, and landscape were ultimately destroyed. This kind of compromise of saving at least the inhabitants and their memory of the lost past appears like an emotional catharsis, like a kind of "healing," as the worst possible extent of the comet crashing is shown in the original storyline. Sociologist Wiley defined four

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Roquet 2009: 88.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *ibid.* : 90.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Fujiki 2015.

<sup>29</sup> Furukuwa/Denison 2015: 230.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*: 234.

<sup>31</sup> Rich 2016.

modes of emotional catharsis that movie viewers may obtain; one mode is related to “conscious troubles,” i.e. physical or psychological problems like a disease or a trauma.<sup>32</sup> He suggests: “The movie (and other artistic) emotions are associated with an attempt to ‘symbolically’ solve these problems.”<sup>33</sup> I argue that *Kimi no na wa* offers such a symbolic solution to the collective trauma as well as an emotional catharsis through its alternate storyline.



Fig. 4: The tsunami-like wave after the comet's crash destroys a bridge. (*Kimi no na wa*: 01:32:21; © CoMix Wave Films)

More recently, Gerstenberger and Nusser further elaborated on the connection between disaster movies and catharsis:

If narratives of disaster tell us something about a particular culture or a specific period of time, so do the mechanisms of managing, the attempts at coping, and the efforts for commemorating. This includes the rhetoric about learning from catastrophe and rebuilding a better and safer world that often accompanies the aftermath of a disaster itself. All of these, we argue, are ways of overcoming the effects of disaster and are as such aimed at achieving catharsis, be it through aesthetic representation, psychoanalytical working through, or intellectual comprehension. Understood like this, the transformation of catastrophe into fiction, very broadly conceived as the imposition of a narrative structure and order onto an event that seems to defy any structure or order, is itself a form of catharsis.<sup>34</sup>

There are several examples of disaster narratives from 20<sup>th</sup> century Japan which were transformed into popular media fiction that aimed at achieving catharsis and possibly helped the public to cope with the traumatic experience. For instance, the

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Wiley 2003: 182.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.: 183.

<sup>34</sup> Gerstenberger/Nusser 2015: 7–8.

huge success of the first *Gojira* movie (*Godzilla*, 1954) is often interpreted as reconciliation from the trauma of war and the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>35</sup> In this movie, after a long and tough struggle, the Japanese self-defense forces (i.e. the Japanese army) can defeat the gigantic monster *Godzilla*, which was born from nuclear bombing in the Pacific. Napier concludes: “The film thus offered its immediate postwar Japanese audience an experience that was both cathartic and compensatory, allowing them to rewrite or at least to reimagine their tragic.”<sup>36</sup> Although *Gojira* seems the most famous example of a fantastic movie that negotiates Japan’s postwar trauma on an abstract level, other media content like director Matsumoto Leiji’s popular science fiction anime franchise *Uchū senkan Yamato* (*Space Battleship Yamato*, 1974–1975) can also be considered in this context.<sup>37</sup>



Fig. 5: Very similar to real Japanese news, the salvation of Itomori’s inhabitants is reported; the characters on the upper right say the most important detail: “deaths: 0 persons”.  
(*Kimi no na wa*: 01:35:49; © CoMix Wave Films)

In the aftermath of the Tohoku triple disaster, Amano investigated how fans of *Uchū senkan Yamato* draw connections between the dystopic space story and the Fukushima nuclear incident. In this anime, the famous Japanese WWII warship *Yamato* was reconstructed as a heroic spaceship that saves earth from radioactive contamination. Amano concludes: “The undeniable fact is that the sense of wonder innate to science fiction anime has become a resource and panacea for viable communication in post-3/11 Japan, even if it does not offer the country a *deus ex machina* to undo the crisis.”<sup>38</sup> This kind of symbolic solution, of “intervention from

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Anisfield 1995.

<sup>36</sup> Napier 1993: 332.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Napier 2005: 2.

<sup>38</sup> Amano 2014: 337.

above” to avoid a similar catastrophe characterizes the climax of *Kimi no na wa*, not in a distant science fiction universe, but in a rather realistic depiction of Japan’s rural and urban spheres. Close to the end of the movie, media footage imitating real Japanese news reports the salvation of Itomori’s inhabitants (Fig. 5), while Taki recalls his memories of the rural town. Even if it remains unclear whether Taki and Mitsuha will remember each other, the more important and satisfying achievement of the movie’s conclusion seems to be the salvation of human lives from a devastating catastrophe.

## 5. Conclusion

*Kimi no na wa* depicts a rather complex image of “the rural” in contemporary Japan without falling into a naïve binary of “the good village” and “the bad city.” The conflict of where life seems more valuable and desirable remains unsolved, even if the urban environment proves to be more convenient in comparison. Thanks to the balanced depiction of the two spheres and many references to the actual difficult situation of rural communities in Japan, like the youths’ outmigration or corrupt politicians, the movie can establish a certain realism coexisting with its fantastic elements of spiritualism, time travel, and body swapping.

My investigation brought to light an interpretation of the movie in the context of the national trauma which followed the Tohoku triple disaster. In its fictive universe, the movie offers a chance to change the extent of a natural catastrophe that resembles the 3/11 events. Even though the tragedy itself and the devastation of the rural town cannot be prevented, at least its inhabitants can be saved. With their memory, “the rural” might not completely vanish. *Kimi no na wa* provides the simulation of a *deus ex machina* salvation that many viewers probably had wished for with the Tohoku triple disaster. Thus, the movie may offer a kind of “healing” of the national trauma in its presentation of an alternate storyline, much like the first *Gojira* movie did for the postwar audience. I believe that the emotional catharsis aspired to by the movie can be regarded as one reason for its huge public acclaim in Japan.

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## Mediography

- Gojira (Godzilla)*. J 1954, Ishirō Honda, 96 min.
- Heisei tanuki gassen ponpoko (Pom Poko)*. J 1994, Isao Takahata, 119 min.



*Kimi no na wa (Your Name)*. J 2016, Makoto Shinkai, 106 min.

*Kokuriko-zaka kara (From Up on Poppy Hill)*. J 2011, Gorō Miyazaki, 91 min.

*Miyori no mori*. J 2007, Nizō Yamamoto, 107 min.

*Nijiïro hotaru (Rainbow Fireflies)*. J 2011, Kōnosuke Uda, 104 min.

*Omohide poro poro (Only Yesterday)*. J 1991, Isao Takahata, 118 min.

*Sen to Chihiro no kamikakushi (Spirited Away)*. J 2001, Hayao Miyazaki, 125 min.

*Tonari no Totoro (My Neighbor Totoro)*. J 1988, Hayao Miyazaki, 86 min.

*Uchū senkan Yamato (Space Battleship Yamato)*. J 1974–1975, Yomiuri TV.

## Figures

Fig. 1: The townscape of Itomori (*Kimi no na wa*: 00:32:13).

Fig. 2: Commercial for *kuchikamizake* (*Kimi no na wa*: 00:16:56).

Fig. 3: Mitsuha's father's speech (*Kimi no na wa*: 00:08:30).

Fig. 4: The comet's crash destroys a bridge (*Kimi no na wa*: 01:32:21).

Fig. 5: News on the salvation of Itomori's inhabitants (*Kimi no na wa*: 01:35:49).