

Makoto Shinkai and His Works: A Search for Someone Special

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Abstract

This paper analyzes Makoto Shinkai's animations. In particular, this paper examines their stories and themes in the animations. His first animation is *Voice of a Distant Star* and it depicts the relationship between a boy and a girl in the context of the universe. He has made four other animations before making *Your Name* in 2016. *Your Name* is not only a box office hit but also a thought-provoking work. The author claims that *Your Name* has two interesting characteristics. One is gender switching. The two main characters, male and female, exchange their soul with their body strangely. It is interesting to observe how the two characters come to term with their body. The other characteristic is time leap. There is a scene in which the male character goes back to the past time and give a warning to the girl that a meteorite would hit the town where she lives and hundreds of people in the town would die. The time leap is effectively used in *Your Name*.

Introduction

Japanese animations have been popular around the world since the mid-1980s, and they are regarded as one of the major strengths of Japan. Unlike animations in other countries, Japanese animations have complex storylines with deep and meaningful themes (Napier, 2005). While some Japanese animations target children, many are more suitable for adults to enjoy. In viewing *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), which was directed by Hayao Miyazaki, in a movie theater in my college days, I was very

impressed by the themes presented and felt quite emotional afterwards. At the time, I did not realize that animation could address complex issues such as sustainability and humanity, but *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* does just that.

It is often said that *Akira* (1988), which was directed by Katsuhiro Otomo, was an epoch-making animation; it even surprised many people outside of Japan by its high quality. Additionally, *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), directed by Mamoru Oshii, dealt with philosophical questions and was favored by anime enthusiasts outside of Japan. This animation inquires about identity and the relationship between mind and body. In 1995 and 1996, *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was broadcast on TV, and many people were amazed by the mysterious and apocalyptic stories. Unlike heroes that often appear in an animation for boys, Shinji, a sensitive and vulnerable boy, is the pilot of a gigantic, partially biological, and partially mechanical creature named Eva. He was abandoned by his father, but his father has invited him to be the pilot of Eva, who generates unbelievably strong force and defeats all enemies. *Neon Genesis Evangelion* was very popular because Shinji was a life-size hero who was very shy and introverted, yet relatable.

Early Works of Makoto Shinkai

In 2002, Makoto Shinkai single-handedly created the short animation *Voice of a Distant Star*. At the time, he did not work for an animation studio and was a novice in animation creation. He quit his job as a designer for a computer game company, and after eight months of working on the digital animation, *Voice of a Distant Star* was born. This animation was unique because it was produced solely on his personal computer. Prior to this, an animation film was first drawn by hand, which meant that animations were dependent on intense manual labor. Wada-Marciano (2012) suggests that this animation is technically similar to television animations, as it repeatedly uses the same images, deliberately uses one image for a long time, and depicts typical anime faces (big eyes, pointed chin, a small mouth, and a sharp nose without nostrils). The figures of the characters in *Voice of a Distant Star* are not as sophisticated or human-like as those of his later animations; in other words, viewers instantly recognize that the characters only exist in the animation, not in reality.

In 2004, Makoto Shinkai made his first full-length animation: *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*. This animation depicts Japan as a divided country, with the main land controlled by the United States, and Ezo, the present-day Hokkaidou, is governed by the Union government. There are some political aspects in this animation, but the major theme is a parallel world that is symbolized by the Tower and Sayuri's dream.

The Tower creates a parallel world that imitates this world. Sayuri's dream is in sync with the Tower, and in her dream, she feels alone in a vast universe. She is a high school girl who suddenly disappears; she is taken to the hospital to be used for scientific research, and is carefully monitored by scholars who specialize in psychoanalysis and quantum theory.

Sayuri had two male friends in her high school days: Hiroki and Takuya. They soon discover that Sayuri has been sleeping for three months in the hospital. When they were high school students, Hiroki made a promise to Sayuri that someday he was going to take her to the Tower; this promise is what connects Sayuri with this world. Her dream is connected to the parallel world that the Tower has created, and the only way to wake Sayuri is to take her to the Tower. Hiroki and Takuya build an airplane and Takuya abducts Sayuri from the hospital. Hiroki pilots the airplane and they take Sayuri to the Tower, where he successfully destroys it with a missile.

The Tower generates enormous power because it is visible but unreachable (Gavin Walker, 2009). In a sense, the Tower symbolizes the colonization of Ezo. Furthermore, the Tower creates a parallel world in which Sayuri lives. In other words, Sayuri's dream is an invisible force that constrains the expansion of a parallel world around the Tower. In this animation, the line between the real world and the parallel work is blurred in Sayuri's life, and it is Hiroki's promise that connects Sayuri in her dream with her in real life. Hiroki likes Sayuri and he wants to bring her back to the real world. The main point of the story line is to look for someone special, and at the end of the animation, Hiroki wakes Sayuri up.

Makoto Shinkai also created *5 Centimeters Per Second* in 2007, which has three episodes. The first episode is a story about Takaki and Akari, who are classmates when they are elementary school students in Tokyo. After Akari transfers to a school in Tochigi prefecture, they begin to exchange letters. Then, Takaki transfers to a school in Tanegashima in Kagoshima prefecture. Before Takaki moves to Tanegashima, Takaki decides to meet Akari by train, but unfortunately the trains are very late due to heavy snow. When Takaki arrives at the station where they are supposed to meet, he is over two hours late. Takaki feels as though he has taken too long, and thinks that Akari has gone home by the time he arrives. However, Akari is still waiting for him at the station, and they finally meet. Takaki kisses Akari, and Takaki thinks that the world is up-side down and everything around him has completely changed.

The second episode is a story about Takaki and Kanae, who are both high school students. When they are junior high school students, Takaki transfers to Kanae's school. Kanae likes him, but she cannot confess her true feelings to him. When they are walking together, Kanae says to herself, "Please do not be kind to me." She cries, but Takaki

does not understand her feelings. The final episode depicts the solitude of Takaki. He grows up and works for a company, but he cannot endure the anxiety and loss that are triggered by an email from Kanae. Kanae notifies Takaki of her marriage, and he quits his job due to mental depression. With a theme song playing in the background, many scenes are shown quickly, depicting the recollection of his memories with Kanae.

In *5 Centimeters Per Second*, the scenery is exquisitely beautiful. In the beginning of the animation, a narrator reads that the leaves of a cherry fall 5 centimeters per second, which implies Takaki's sense of loss. Many scenes are based on actual scenery, and they are detailed and delicate; it is as if the setting is a real place even though it is an artificially created world. Upon visiting Makoto Shinkai's exhibition in November 2017, I was very impressed by the high quality of animation scenes. For instance, there is a scene in which Takaki and Akari are walking in an alleyway and on their left side are cars parked next to the wall of a park with cherry blossoms. A photo of this scene and an animation scene are juxtaposed in the exhibition, and the animation scene appeared to be more real than the photo.

Children Who Chase Lost Voices (2011) depicts a search for the meaning of life and death. Asuna Watari is an elementary school girl, and she encounters a beast-like creature on the train bridge in her village. Shun, a boy who is from another world, helps her and kills the creature. Asuna likes Shun, but he is killed. Mr. Morisaki, who teaches classic Japanese in the elementary school that Asuna attends, has a secret mission. He wants to meet Risa, his wife who died ten years earlier. Similarly, Asuna wants to see Shun again as Mr. Morisaki searches for the soul of his diseased wife. Together they embark on a journey to the end of the world. On the way, they are assisted by Shin, the younger brother of Shun. At the end of the story, Mr. Morisaki meets his deceased wife who temporarily uses Asuna's body. However, she soon disappears as Shun destroys the stone that is the source of life for Risa; instead, Asuna survives. Both Mr. Morisaki and Asuna are searching for the reincarnation of their loved ones, and on the way, they ponder the meaning of life and death.

In *Children Who Chase Lost Voices*, people living on the earth are depicted as evils that ruin civilization. In other words, they are cursed and destined to cause many troubles for many people in different places. The main characters, Asuna and Mr. Morisaki, have to live with a sense of loss for their loved ones, and even though this kind of life is hard for them, they have to live on. In other words, their life is celebrated because life itself is full of hope and potential. This animation shows how important it is for people to live and accept death. Life and death are just temporary stages in a larger cycle of something sacred and holy.

The *Garden of Words* (2013) is a pale love story. Takao Akizuki is a high school

student in Tokyo, and he is reluctant to go to school when it is rainy. Rain makes him feel gloomy, and he spends some time in a resting place with a roof in the park. Yukari Yukino is a high school teacher who is bullied by students and she avoids going to school. Therefore, she spends time in the resting place in the park, and she meets Takao. Takao tells Yukino that he wants to be a shoemaker and asks her to measure the size of her foot. She is kind enough to give him a chance to make shoes for her. Yukino has a taste disorder and can only recognize the taste of beers and chocolates because of her mental depression, but she has never told him about her problems.

In this animation, rain plays an important role in making the relationship between Takao and Yukari more dramatic. When Takao confesses that he falls in love with Yukari in her room, Yukari declines his love for her. Takao leaves the room because Yukari's attitude is condescending. After a while, Yukari also leaves the room with bare feet and chases him in the rain. She finds him on the landing of a set of stairs. He tells her that he hates her and that he should not have told her his dream. She approaches him and holds him, saying that she has been saved by him and could not be honest in front of him. Their tears and rain synchronize beautifully, and their emotions are shown explicitly through the rain.

Your Name

One of Makoto Shinkai's most recent works includes *Your Name* in 2016. It was a box office hit not only in Japan, but also in the United States and other countries. The animation earned about twenty-four billion yen in Japan and five million dollars in the United States. In addition, the theme song played by Radwinps, a Japanese rock group, was a smash hit. The music is in sync with images on the screen, and the viewers have empathy with the characters and scenes in the animation.

Upon visiting Makoto Shinkai's exhibition in Tokyo in November 2017, I gained a deeper understanding of his works. I had already watched six animations that he directed, yet I still learned new information. For instance, the short commercial animation *Cross Over*, which was made for a mail service company that provides corrections and comments on students' answers for entrance exams to prestigious high schools and universities, was a harbinger for *Your Name*. In *Cross Over*, a boy and a girl live far away from each other, but their answers to questions given by the company are coincidentally very similar. Thus, they are destined to meet each other when they pass an entrance exam to a university. Another example is Onono Komachi's poem, "While I was sleeping and having a dream, a person to whom I had a fancy appears in my dream. If I realize that it is a dream, I want to keep sleeping." This motif is

present in *Your Name*, and I learned that the poem is one of the seeds from which this animation sprouted.

In the exhibition, both a real-life photo and a scene from an animation are juxtaposed on the wall. Surprisingly, the scene from the animation is very realistic when compared to the details of the scenery shown in the photo. I call this verisimilar realism in Shinkai Makoto's animation, and I believe it has two effects. One is that the viewers perceive that what is happening in the animation is fictional, but they also assume that the incidents can happen in the real world. In other words, the verisimilitude of the scenes in the animation helps viewers believe that the story can occur in a real world. Therefore, the viewers feel closer to the places or persons who appear in the animation because they seem to be authentic. To put it differently, verisimilar reality creates a reflection of realistic scenes in the animation that mirrors our world; thus, the animated world is closely connected to the real world. The other effect is that viewers embark on a pilgrimage to the place that the animation depicts. In the case of *Your Name*, the last scene in which Mitsuha and Taki meet is set on the stairs in front of the Suga shrine in Yotsuya, Tokyo. Another example is the café where Taki and his co-worker, Miki, have lunch together; the café is in the National Art Center in Tokyo. When these real-life places are depicted, fans of the animation regard them as sacred and visit them to show homage. When many people visit them, they become tourist destinations.

The story of *Your Name* starts with the fall of a meteorite, devastating the town of Itomori. This scene reminds the viewers of the atomic bombs in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and the Great East Japan Earthquake that devastated many towns and cities in 2011. Unlike the atomic bombs at the end of World War II or the big earthquake, meteorites are welcomed and enjoyed by people because they are spectacular and make the night sky unusually colorful. However, unexpectedly a meteorite hit the town and killed hundreds of residents. The viewers do not learn about the death of the residents in the beginning.

When Mitsuha Miyamizu wakes up in her hometown of Itomori, she feels as though she had a dream. Her younger sister, Yotsuha, comes to her room to wake her up, and Yotsuha witnesses Mitsuha touching her breasts with both hands; she thinks it is strange that she has breasts. In turn, Yotsuha thinks that Mitsuha is weird. At first, the viewers do not know why Mitsuha feels as though her body is strange. However, it turns out that her mind possessed a boy's body in Tokyo the previous day, and at the same time the boy's mind possessed Mitsuha's body. Taki, a boy who lives in Tokyo, is a high school student. When he wakes up, he feels his body does not fit him. To our surprise, Mitsuha's mind is in Taki's body. Taki does not know how to get to his high school and almost skips his part-time job that day.

Both Mitsuha and Taki are conscious of the other person, but they are not sure of who they are at first. Actually, they had met each other on a train in Tokyo before the switch occurred. They are tied with a red yarn and seem destined to meet each other again. They keep track of what they do through a cell phone to cause less trouble in their daily life, and sometimes they even enjoy the other's life.

One of the interesting aspects of this animation is the idea of gender switching. The phenomenon of gender switching is not a new concept in Japanese movies; the most well-known movie that deals with this is *A Transfer Student* (1982), directed by Nobuhiko Obayashi. Kazumi Saito is a transfer student and she meets Kazuo Saito in a high school in Onomichi. She used to live in Onomichi before and Kazuo is one of her childhood friends. One day they meet in a shrine and Kazumi tumbles down the stairs. Kazuo tries to help her, but he also tumbles down the stairs along with Kazumi. Consequently, their mind is switched and Kazumi becomes manly while Kazuo becomes effeminate. The people around them, including their parents, teachers, and classmates, notice that something is wrong. In particular, Kazumi's mind who is inside of Kazuo's body struggles with coping with the balance between mind and body, and Kazuo hints at the possibility that he may commit suicide. Because of Kazuo's father's job, he has to move to another city that is far away from Onomichi, and Kazuo and Kazumi are in a rush to solve their problem. When they meet in the shrine, they tumble down the stairs again, and both of their minds return to their original bodies.

It is interesting to note that in this film, the female mind inside of a male body experiences more troubles than the male mind inside the female body. For instance, when Kazuo is bullied by his classmates, Kazumi helps him and defeats the classmates like a strong man. The male mind inside Kazumi controls the body as he wishes. On the other hand, the female mind in Kazuo feels constrained in the body and does not feel freedom in his behavior. I believe that masculinity was more privileged than femininity in the 1980s, and the male mind dominates the female body while the female mind is intimidated by the male body.

In *Your Name*, the gender switch does not cause any major problems. However, their behavioral patterns and way of speaking have changed, and their friends take notices. They feel that Mitsuha has become active, aggressive, and unpredictable, and Taki has become friendly, kind, and effeminate. It seems to me that both of these characters enjoy being in the other's body, and they do not feel any conflict between their mind and body. For example, Taki works part-time at a restaurant in Tokyo, and his co-worker Miki Okudera has an accident in which her skirt is cut by one of the costumers complaining about the food. Taki is able to embroider the fabric over the cut. Miki compliments that Taki is girly and has a high level of aesthetics, which indicates that a

boy with a girly nature is praised by a woman.

The gender switch reverses on the day when the meteorite hits Itomori. At first, Taki does not understand why he is not in Mitsuha's body. He recalls what he sees when his mind possessed Mitsuha's body, and he decides to visit the town where Mitsuha lives. When he arrives in Takayama in Gifu prefecture with his friends, he learns that Itomori was devastated by a meteorite three years before and that Mitsuha and her younger sister, Yotsuha, were two of the victims. He cannot believe it because he had only been switched to Mitsuha within the past few months.

Taki visits the object of worship believed to contain the spirit of a deity on the top of the mountain. There is a stream around the object and we learn that the stream is the boundary between life and death. When he goes inside the stream, he must leave something very important near the object of worship in order to come back to the present life. Taki finds two bottles of sake, and one of them contains Mitsuha's saliva. He drinks it and leaps through time to the day when the meteorite hits Itomori. Taki tells Mitsuha that the meteorite will hit Itomori and that residents should evacuate to a safe place like the high school that evening.

The flow of time in this animation is discursive rather than linear. There is a gap between the time that Taki passes and the time that Mitsuha spends. At first Taki thinks that Mitsuha is living simultaneously; however, Mitsuha's time is three years behind Taki's time, and Taki in a sense comes to Mitsuha's world from the future and plays the role of a savior. This is similar to Kyle Reese who tries to save an unborn leader of the earth in *Terminator* (1984). Mitsuha firmly believes what Taki tells her and makes a plan for evacuation with her friends.

Time leap is an unrealistic phenomenon, but it is at times effectively used in animation. In *A Girl Who Leapt through Time*, directed by Mamoru Hosoda (2006), Makoto Konno, a high school girl, touches a special device that enables her to leap through time and go back to the past. Even though there is a limit on the number of time leaps, she leaps time to make a situation better. At first, her attempt to fix a problem with time leap works well, but she gradually acknowledges that another person faces another problem when one person's situation gets better. In other words, everyone's time is tightly connected, and a change of one's situation affects others' situation; thus, it is not possible for her to make everyone happy.

In a science room of the high school that Makoto goes to in *A Girl Who Leapt through Time*, the phrase "Time waits for no one" is written on the blackboard. This message means that if we can go back to the past, we spend our time differently than the first time. Time cannot be repeated, even though a time machine was invented to make it possible to go back to the past. In the case of *Your Name*, Taki has a strong

will to save Mitsuha and the people around her, and he tries to change what happens to Itomori. Because of his action, people in the town were saved and they spend time peacefully after the meteorite strikes the town.

The grandmother of Mitsuha, Ichiha, understands Mitsuha's dream despite implying that no one in the town believes that a meteorite will strike Itomori and many residents will die. The Miyamizu family have a capacity that enables them to experience somebody's life in a dream. Ichiha told Mitsuha that she had similar experiences when she was young, as did Mitsuha's mother. When Ichiha, Mitsuha, and Yotsuha visit the god of Miyamizu Shrine, Ichiha says that the god unites people and gods. She also says that ties with other people are very important. The Miyamizus practice braiding threads together to make cords, and Mitsuha says the cords symbolize the ties between people and between different times.

The most conspicuous tie in *Your Name* is the relationship between Mitsuha and Taki. In the very beginning scene, both Mitsuha and Taki appear briefly in their twenties, and then Mitsuha and Taki are shown with their school uniforms and they are tied with a red string. Likewise, in the very end of this animation, Mitsuha and Taki are in their twenties and recognize each other while taking different trains in Tokyo. They get off the trains and finally meet after passing by each other on the stairs. They are attracted to each other instantly when they meet in a train for the first time, and Taki's will to save Mitsuha in Itomori is a driving force to advance the story in this animation.

Makoto Shinkai has also published the novel *Your Name*. He says that after starting to create the animation of *Your Name*, he started to write a novel; in a sense, he wrote the novel based on the animation. The difference between the animation and the novel is that it is easier to recognize which perspective is being portrayed in the novel. When *watasi* is used for the personal pronoun I, the story shows Mitsuha's perspective. When *boku* is used for I, the story is written from the viewpoint of Taki.

Conclusion

Makoto Shinkai is undoubtedly one of the most talented animation directors in the world. He creates an original story, and transforms it into an animation. The aesthetic quality of the animation is very high, and the story is very realistic with delicate and sophisticated depiction. He often tells of a quest for finding someone special or a soul mate, and his stories make us wonder who that precious person is in our own life. His works remind us of the importance of looking for someone special, or perhaps your better half.

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