A Girl, a Cat, and a Chair across Ruins: Nature, Landscape, and the Construction of Identity in *Suzume no Tojimari*

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Abstract: Makoto Shinkai's Golden Globe-nominated animated film, *Suzume no Tojimari* (2022) emphasises the impact of human activities on the landscape, reflecting broader themes of environmental responsibility. This paper analyses how Shinkai's poignant narrative intertwines identity with the landscape, capturing how natural locations become integral to one's memory and the ever-changing tapestry of human experience. According to Sam Turner, the interaction between people and landscapes is a dynamic process that simultaneously shapes human societies and is influenced by them. Suzume's journey through various landscapes nationwide to stop the mythical worm from causing a national environmental mishap akin to the 3/11 disaster mirrors her journey of discovering a human being's place within the natural world. While the recurring motif of ruins clinging onto the memories of their past inhabitants establishes abandoned places as active reservoirs of emotions, the critique of anthropocentric beliefs encapsulated by the chant that prevents disasters marks the impudence of claiming nature under human ownership. As a young girl travels through different environments with a cursed talking chair and the cat Daijin, a kami (spirit being), she discovers the interconnectedness of landscapes, people, and the natural world, and how these interactions shape identities—both individual and communal. Besides exploring how personal growth and self-discovery are intertwined with the natural and cultural environments, this paper also aims to examine how Shinkai's film, set in the backdrop of the Tohoku triple disaster, uses nature and landscapes to reinforce a shared sense of national and cultural identity.

Keywords: Landscape, Identity, Trauma, National Identity, Animated Film, Ecocriticism, Human-Non-Human Relationship

Makoto Shinkai's Golden Globe-nominated animated film *Suzume no Tojimari* (2022) captures the journey of the young protagonist Suzume across the Japanese archipelago in a desperate attempt to prevent a catastrophic earthquake by sealing mystical doors located in the middle of ruins. The film, literally translated as "Suzume's Locking/Shutting up," presents a young high school girl who accidentally unlocks a mysterious door, unleashing the worm—a mythical creature that causes disastrous earthquakes. Along with Souta, the designated closer of these doors and a mischievous cat, Daijin, Suzume encounters various abandoned places, each rich with cultural memory and environmental significance on her journey, and it is through the interactions of these characters with diverse terrains from rural areas to urban landscapes, to finally at the heart of Tokyo, Shinkai's work engages in cultural storytelling that serves both as a medium for ecophilic introspection and identity reconstruction. By exploring the intricate narratives of human experience and the sense of both individual and shared identity, the film reflects the dynamic relationship between humans and nature. As Souta gets cursed by a capricious cat, Daijin and turned into a three-legged chair, the narrative captures Suzume's journey across various locations throughout Japan, accompanied by the sentient chair and the mischievous cat that collectively contribute to Suzume's understanding of her identity and her place in the world. Through the diverse locations acting as active repositories of collective memories and experiences, Shinkai constructs a shared national identity rooted in the symbiotic relationship between people and their environment. The film's portrayal of landscapes as integral to human experience and memory reflects a cultural ethos that sees the natural world as central to the Japanese identity while itself attempting to redefine what this unique national identity is. Thus, Shinkai's poignant narrative intertwines identity, individual as well as cultural, with the landscape, capturing how natural locations become integral to one's memory and the ever-changing tapestry of human experience.

The spatial domains that individuals occupy, alongside their engagements with various contextual environments—such as socio-economic status, religious beliefs, and gender dynamics play a crucial role in forming personal and collective identities as individuals derive substantial aspects of

their identity from the landscapes they inhabit. Recent scholarship has established that the concept of landscape transcends mere geographical delineation, embodying the intricate interplay of natural and human elements. As articulated by Sam Turner, landscape has evolved into an integral component of material culture, dynamically influencing and being influenced by human-nature interactions (Turner 387). This phenomenon, referred to as landscape identity, is a complex synthesis of biophysical characteristics and socio-cultural dimensions, reflecting the deep interconnections between people and their environments. The notion of landscape identity represents both a social and personal construct, wherein the physical attributes of the environment serve as essential elements (Stobbelaar & Pedroli 322-3). In the construction of individual and collective identity, geological elements gain additional dimensions through their associations with memories and socio-political structures, thereby becoming integral to the formation of cultural and national identities. The 3/11 disaster in Japan profoundly affected people's perception of their physical surroundings, heightening awareness of the transience of everyday life within their cherished homeland. This catastrophe, partially caused by the disruption of the order of the natural world through human exploration and exploitation, engendered a collective sense of helplessness—an anxiety deeply rooted in their geographic position. As argued by Catherine Brace, landscapes can be represented to articulate the established order and naturalise national power by providing a quasi-physical manifestation of the nation, thus solidifying what Benedict Anderson termed the "imagined community" (Brace 127-9). *Suzume no Tojimari* aims to manufacture a sense of identity by defamiliarizing landscapes and the interactions between the human and non-human world to reinforce a sense of national identity against the backdrop of the shared trauma wrought by natural disasters. Shinkai's narrative intertwines personal and national identities with landscapes, emphasising the idea of the interconnectedness of human beings, non-human creatures, the natural world, and the nation.

Suzume's journey navigating through different regions of the nation to avert the impending destruction caused by the worm portrays the physicality of landscapes as reflective and inductive of societal and environmental harmony. Shinkai highlights the Japanese concept of musubi to illustrate

the interconnectedness and unity among humans, nature, and non-sentient objects, emphasising the necessity of maintaining harmony. Musubi, central to the Shinto worldview, underscores the reciprocal relationships between all elements of existence. Suzume's interactions with the spirit of nature Daijin who is a playful cat, and a cursed chair that was once the human being Souta, highlight the interconnectedness of sentient and non-sentient beings emphasising the Shinto belief in the unity of all things. Suzume's journey through various landscapes—from rural towns to bustling cities—exemplifies the multidimensional connections between humans and the natural world with each landscape serving as a site of continuous interaction which becomes essential for Suzume's personal growth and environmental stewardship. Resisting anthropocentric egotism of being the "saviour" of nature, Shinkai points out that human efforts to save nature are but acts of modesty and respect for the inherent value of all beings, sentient and non-sentient alike, as human beings are not masters of nature but members of the larger community of life (Gossin 211). Even as Suzume and Souta prevent the worm from causing another disaster, the film underscores that nature's right to exist is independent of the value humans may ascribe to it. This sentiment is captured by the prayer the characters chant while concealing the worm, "O divine kami who dwell beneath this land... You have long protected us for generations... Thy mountains and rivers that we have long called our own... We return them to you!" (Bardon 37). This chant of modesty and surrender to nature halts the worm emphasising the futility of anthropocentric views that destroy the natural order of existence. Shinkai's use of musubi in *Suzume no Tojimari* thus serves as a commentary on the interconnectedness of life, encouraging a harmonious coexistence that respects the intrinsic worth of all elements within the natural world. Through vivid depictions of Japan's diverse landscapes, the film creates a unified vision of a nation deeply rooted in the principles of interconnectedness and mutual respect. Thus, the narrative illustrates the essence of human relationships with nature, portraying these relationships as crucial for understanding one's place in both society and the world.

Shinkai skilfully incorporates the Japanese folkloric concept of a giant subterranean worm, believed to cause earthquakes, to explore the interconnectedness of human and natural worlds and

foreground the constant threat posed by natural disasters in Japan. The portrayal of the worm emphasises the critical importance of harmony between humans and nature as the worm's destructive potential, accidentally unleashed by Suzume, presents the dire consequences of thoughtless human manipulation of nature. The film employs the worm to personify and recontextualise natural disasters, infusing the story with a sense of mythic realism while highlighting nature's latent and unpredictable power. The mythical quality is further emphasised by the depiction of Daijin and Sadaijin, two spiritual entities embodying kami. In Shinto belief, kami are spirits that inhabit natural elements, objects, and phenomena, governing the natural world and influencing human life. Shinkai integrates this concept through Daijin and Sadaijin, who play crucial roles in Suzume's journey and the narrative's exploration of human and non-human relationships. Daijin and Sadaijin serve as keystones in ensuring the closure of the doors and preventing the worm from escaping the land of the afterlife. They personify the harmonious relationship between humans and nature. However, Shinkai avoids reducing these characters to mere anthropomorphised figures by presenting Daijin as both a force of chaos and a key to balance. This duality reflects the traditional Shinto view of kami as beings that can be both benevolent and malevolent, depending on their interactions with humans and the environment. Through these characters, Shinkai underscores the necessity of maintaining balance and respect in the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Daijin embodies the unpredictable and multifaceted nature of spiritual forces, guiding Suzume while also challenging her understanding of both the natural and supernatural realms. Analysing Shinkai's choice of a cat as a representative of nature, Asha Bardon draws the parallel that cats, like nature in Shinkai's world, are unpredictable and cannot be entirely domesticated (Bardon 47-8). Daijin's health and spirit fluctuate with Suzume's affection, commenting on how nature is constantly affected by human interaction—he becomes malnourished and depressed when Suzume chides him but regains his health and spirit on receiving her affection. Both Daijin and Sadaijin illustrate the dynamic relationship between humans and nature and the need for balance. The transformation of Souta into a three-legged chair due to Daijin's curse

further highlights the theme of imbalance brought about by human actions. It is only through restoring balance that Souta's curse is ultimately broken, and he regains his human form.

In *Suzume no Tojimari*, ruins play a pivotal role in illustrating the intricate relationship between humanity and nature. These ruins are not merely projections of human activity but serve as significant motifs within the film, weaving together notions of abandonment, memory, and identity. The narrative ties these forsaken spaces, which have grown in Japan over recent decades as a means to the gates leading to the liminal realm of the afterlife. At the outset of the film, Suzume's encounter with Souta prompts her to explore an abandoned site, where she inadvertently unleashes the catastrophic worm, thus initiating her journey across various neglected locations in Japan, accompanied by the sentient chair and the capricious cat. The visits to deserted places such as the abandoned school, theme park, and an underground station in Tokyo are crucial narrative elements that offer the audience insights into the histories embedded within these structures. The ruins emerge as repositories of collective memory, reflecting both natural and human-induced calamities. To contain the chaos and restore order, Suzume must connect with and acknowledge the memories of the former inhabitants that these spaces still hold. In doing so, the film presents the ruins not only as remnants of human activity but as active sites of memory and identity. These abandoned locations, shaped by both natural and anthropogenic forces, highlight the dynamic relationship between humanity and the natural world. They serve as multivocal points of interaction where the identities of both people and places are constantly reproduced and transformed. By exploring these neglected spaces, Suzume's journey underscores the importance of remembering and honouring the past as a means to navigate and reconcile with the present, thereby reinforcing a collective identity grounded in shared history and experience. Thus, these ruins are depicted not simply as vestiges of bygone human activities but as active storehouses of memory, contributing to the formation and evolution of collective identity. At both the narrative's beginning and end, Suzume crosses into the ultimate ruin—the liminal land of the afterlife. This world-sized ruin, overtaken by nature with moss-covered houses and a ship stranded by the tide, represents a stark departure from anthropocentric spaces. Described

as a realm where "time in its entirety… The stars, then sunset, and the morning sky. Within that realm, it was as though all time had melted together in the sky," this space embodies the ultimate dissolution of human influence and the dominance of the natural world (Bardon 38). This space embodies the absolute dominance of the natural world devoid of humanity, as it is mentioned that here, no human life is possible. Here, the worm, symbolising nature's more destructive forces, roams freely, underscoring the tension between human order and natural chaos. *Suzume no Tojimari* employs the concept of ruins to articulate that landscapes are in a perpetual state of flux, shaped by and shaping human experiences. Abandoned by their inhabitants, these landscapes transform into dynamic points of interaction between humans and the natural world, where both individual and collective identities are perpetually redefined.

Japan's frequent exposure to seismic activity profoundly influences its cultural narratives, which often reflect a deep respect as well as apprehension for nature's power and a keen awareness of humanity's vulnerability. The Tohoku triple disaster of March 2011, comprising a 9.0 magnitude earthquake and a devastating tsunami followed by the catastrophic meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, profoundly reshaped the collective consciousness and cultural landscape of Japan, instigating a deep-seated reflection on their vulnerability to natural and man-made catastrophes. Following the Second World War bombings, the Fukushima nuclear disaster, one of the most significant nuclear accidents since Chernobyl, exposed critical flaws in Japan's disaster preparedness and nuclear safety protocols, prompting a re-evaluation of energy policies and fuelling anti-nuclear movements. On one hand, the disaster highlighted the authorities 'inadequate preparedness, adding to the growing distrust towards governmental figures. On the other hand, it also fostered a sense of solidarity among the general populace, strengthened by the collective experience of grief and subsequent recovery efforts. This shared trauma prompted profound introspection regarding humanity's relationship with nature and the implications of technological advancement. The disaster brought forth vulnerabilities within societal and infrastructural frameworks, demanding a re-evaluation of national priorities and values. The Tohoku disaster significantly reinvigorated

societal values of community resilience and mutual aid, as Japanese citizens, initially perceived as isolated in their plight, united in response to the calamity. This collective solidarity amid adversity is mirrored in post-3/11 Japanese literature, film, and art, which recurrently address themes of loss, memory, and renewal.

As Timo Thelen notes, the 3/11 catastrophe has ascended to the status of national trauma not merely due to the disaster's magnitude, but because it has been socially constructed as such, thereby consequently shaping public discourse and cultural production and highlighting the enduring human spirit in the face of immense adversity (Thelen 224). Within popular culture, the disaster is recontextualised to cultivate both a culture of fear and uncertainty and to forge a centralised understanding of the relationship between the populace and their land. Shinkai's narrative addresses this national trauma through Suzume's personal trauma of losing her mother in the 3/11 tragedy and the fear of losing Souta and multiple other people to a similar disaster on the account that she fails to stop the worm. In the film, the mythical worm's emergence through the door accidentally unlocked by the young high school girl triggering a devastating earthquake at the film's outset, foregrounds the ever-present national fear. Suzume, then, must embark on a mission to prevent the worm from emerging through various doors scattered across the Japanese archipelago and restore the order she disrupted. This quest underscores the human aspiration to comprehend and mitigate natural forces, reflecting a cultural reverence for nature and the delicate balance required to avert catastrophic destruction. *Suzume no Tojimari,* then, forges a cathartic experience for both the characters and the audience as the catastrophe is shown to the contained by human endeavour and the sheer courage of a young Japanese girl.

Analysing the objectives and impacts of post-3/11 Japanese cinema, Thelen argues that these films often provide an element of "healing" and offer a form of emotional catharsis for the audiences (Thelen 215-7). Besides curating a similar sense of wish-fulfilment, Shinkai's film reinforces the trope of Nihonjinron or a homogenised "Japanese Spirit" by employing the nation's diverse landscapes. Suzume's journey across the Japanese archipelago to prevent another Tohoku-like disaster showcases

the nation's geographical diversity. The film begins with a scene reminiscent of the Tohoku earthquake, before shifting to the tranquil town of Miyazaki Prefecture, characterised by calm seas and mountains. Following her encounters with Souta and Daijin, Suzume travels by ferry to Shikoku and through Ehime, before hitchhiking through rural Honshu to Kobe. She then takes the Shinkansen bullet train to Tokyo and eventually returns to her hometown in Iwate, passing through the Kanto and Tohoku regions. Shinkai vividly depicts various Japanese landscapes: the seaside tranquillity of Miyazaki, the rural charm of Kobe enhanced by her interaction with Chika Amabe, the vibrant nightlife of Ehime where Suzume works at a bar, and the bustling metropolitan life of Tokyo with its skyscrapers and bullet trains. Shinkai skilfully depicts the differences between the spaces through the indoor spaces and food. At the beginning of the film, we see Suzume having breakfast at her home in front of the television while her aunt Tamaki prepares food in the spacious kitchen. Chika Amabe's traditional Japanese house in Kobe with both the girls adorned in traditional yukata appears in stark contrast to the cramped kitchen of Rumi Ninomiya's bar at Ehime with the two women wearing flashy western clothes and the small apartment room of Souta in Tokyo where Suzume literally and symbolically steps into Souta's boots. Despite the distinctiveness of each landscape, they collectively contribute to Suzume's understanding of her identity and place in the society while simultaneously shaping the varied landscapes and practices as cultural signifiers of a unified nation. Since World War II, Japan has strived to construct a unique national identity, with the 3/11 disaster becoming a part of Japan's collective trauma and the narrative of a resilient nation. The concept of "Japanese Spirit" or Nihonjinron has emerged through popular culture, portraying Japan as unique among nations. Shinkai skilfully uses diverse landscapes to create a cohesive image of Japan, where individually varied regions form a unified picture of the nation. These landscapes are not mere settings but integral components that infuse the mental and material worlds, allowing both the protagonist and the audience to experience and understand the interconnectedness of the world and the nation.

The film intricately explores the themes of environmental awareness, individual belonging, and the forging of a national identity through the lens of natural calamities and landscapes. Shinkai aims to influence the younger generation to develop a more eco-centric relationship with the environment. This intention is evident in Suzume's interaction with Souta's grandfather at the hospital. Hitsujiro views Souta's transformation into a keystone as a noble sacrifice, but Suzume, who lost her mother to a natural disaster, sees it as a tragic loss of youth—something she is determined to amend. Suzume's journey across various Japanese landscapes, interactions with diverse individuals, and development of a sense of community enable her to process her trauma, avert the disaster, and save Souta. Young people, disillusioned by the middle-class ideals of the earlier generations, seek to find balance in a precarious world, and thus, they are the ones who embody resilience and a newfound sense of ecological responsibility, suggesting a way forward in the face of environmental challenges in Shinkai's narrative. This is further marked by the general obliviousness of the populace to the looming environmental catastrophe, mirroring real-world apathy. After Suzume inadvertently releases the worm, only she and Souta can perceive the impending threat, while others remain ignorant. However, even though clueless themselves, the people Suzume interacts with choose to believe her and help her in her attempt thereby ultimately saving Japan unknowingly. Shinkai's narrative underscores the emotional precariousness of late modern, industrialised societies and presents empathy and sense of community as the only way in finding one's foot in this growingly unstable society.

The film, set against the backdrop of the 2011 triple disaster, utilises the protagonist Suzume's journey to explore themes of collective trauma and healing and while doing so, Shinkai delineates a process of identity formation that resonates deeply with "Japaneseness", a concept encapsulating shared experiences of natural disasters and the profound connection to the environment. The portrayal of the journey through the archipelago reflects not just her personal growth but also the necessity of moving towards ecological as well as communal harmony in the process and highlights the need to acknowledge and respect the power and unpredictability of nature, promoting a symbiotic relationship

between humans and their environment. The film uses sentimental fantasy to express a sense of national identity, aiming to reclaim essential elements of Japanese culture by transforming the relationship between individuals and the natural world into a cultural identifier. Through Suzume's interactions with various environments, Shinkai presents landscapes as dynamic spaces under continuous construction rather than static entities. These evolving landscapes reflect and shape social life, underscoring how human interactions and experiences influence the form and perception of natural spaces (Robertson & Richards 07). This approach reflects a broader cultural ethos where the natural world is not just a backdrop for human activity but a vital, active participant in shaping cultural and personal identities thereby itself transforming into a cultural signifier. *Suzume no Tojimari* positions the landscape as a central character in the story of national identity formation and Suzume's quest becomes a metaphor for Japan's collective effort to navigate and reconcile with its historical as well as environmental realities while attempting to manufacture a unified national identity rooted in the symbiotic relationship between human, non-human, nature, and culture.

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