

MAKOTO SHINKAI'S “*YOUR NAME*”

THE SUBLIME HYPERREAL AS BEAUTY WITHIN SADNESS.

by Lorenzo Marras



«Removee viventes in hac vita de statu miserie et perducere ad statum felicitatis» (To remove the living from the state of misery in this life and lead them to the state of happiness).

Dante, Ep. XIII,

39

Your Name arrived in Italy in January 2017, driven by the echo of its tremendous success in Japan and worldwide (grossing over 380 million dollars, thus becoming the most successful Japanese film - animated or otherwise - in history) and a deluge of enthusiastic reviews. After watching the film, it is impossible not to acknowledge that both the box office results and the critical acclaim are more than deserved. In fact, *Your Name* is one of those works, increasingly rare nowadays, for which hyperbole – usually to be avoided in critical analysis – doesn't seem inappropriate. Because *Your*

Name is truly an extraordinary Anime, a “marvelous spectacle”.

Trailer:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=27q1kdb3sNY>



Gratia contemplationis, Taki

Extraordinary not so much because it tells, through a trembling emotionality, an archetypal tale about the tenacity and universality of love, desire, and hope, even their salvific value. Nor because, through the story of two teenagers, Taki and Mitsuha – mysteriously connected beyond space and time by the grace contemplation of a falling star – it seems to embody Japan's historic bipolarity, that of archaic, rural, and ritual tradition and that of technological and neoliberal hypermodernity; a bipolarity that is also at times mysterious and paradoxical, like that of a bond in division, a bond that draws strength and vitality from its (apparent) contradictions, from the continuous interplay of the two opposing aspects, where one is always the shadow, the unconscious of the other.

No, the uniqueness of *Your Name* does not lie in these aspects, or at least not only. It resides, instead, in the way of storytelling, in the way Shinkai presents their story, dramatizes it, “draws” - no term has ever been more apt. - and at the same time “writes” that precise thematic content (“to draw”, in this sense, a bit like the Russian iconographers, who did not know the distinction between writing and painting, drawing); namely, through a staging and a writing that manages to give the unfolding a rhythm that is always engaging and easy to follow, while at the same time deploying it in a deep and complex metaphorical interplay, all played out on a refined interweaving of analepses and prolepses, flashbacks, and flashforwards.



Gratia contemplationis, Mitsuha

A dramatic structure, then, simple yet never simplistic, complex without being complicated. Despite the use of narrative devices that resonate with tradition, Shinkai skillfully weaves them into a visual fabric, imbuing them with new and profound meaning, thus avoiding the tired path of stereotypes. Resonances, that is, of works (among the many that could be mentioned) such as *Freaky Friday*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Maximum Overdrive*, as well as the original Korean version of *My Sassy Girl* (2001), and even, during the twilight encounter, *Le Rayon vert*.



Taki e Mitsuha, switching places.

In this way, Shinkai is able to offer the audience a work that is indeed “fantasy” (“urban fantasy”), but in the sense of highly literary fantasy; a work as deep as the sea into which one's imagination must plunge not only to propose, but also to conceive a plot that is both complex in its diegetic construction and in its layering of analysis levels, yet equally easy and accessible. It is worth noting that depth does not lie solely in sensory and/or intellectual intensity - which, while remaining profound, could render it empty and superficial - but in its ability to expand and unfold, always taking one step further in the descent towards the heights of Shinkai's *mundus imaginalis*. The interweaving of *Your Name* is noteworthy, as it is an uncommon and outdated feature in today's cinema - wherein every narratological mechanism moment appears to be true, rigorously consequential with respect to its immanent rationality

and the architecture of *inventio* and setting.



The graphic level in *Your Name* is exemplified by the refinement of the detail, especially in how the brightness of the sky and clouds is modified by the trail of a comet fragment. Moreover, Shinkai's works feature a recurring visual *topos* (trope), that of the line and/or thread: vectors that “bind,” unite and separate in his poetics, or, more accurately, unite by separating and separate by uniting.

Without any doubt, among the various valuable aspects of *Your Name*, the most immediately evident is the formal one, as visually Shinkai's film is simply stunning. And thus, storytelling becomes expressed, dramatized, through drawings and animations of a beauty that leaves one breathless (*shinjirarenai* – “incredible”, “amazing” – one might say in Japanese), sometimes facing images, panels, and colorings that manage to move one as they are. For those familiar with the author's previous works, which are also often prodigious in their tireless pursuit of stylistic perfection - and which many in Japan consider to be even more authentic than reality itself, more real than real - this is not new. In *Your Name*, however, Shinkai seems to have made a further leap in his poetics of the “hyperreal sublime”, in the natural, daily, more true than true detail that becomes not only a vector of a story but “history” in itself. And so, telling a story comes to merge and sublimate with the “history”, becoming its most true and authentic, emotional and emotive expression, indeed “better” than reality itself. A qualitative leap, which can be seen in *Your Name*, which is also evident precisely in the balance between depicting and narrating, here truly at the limit of perfection; or, better yet, in its always almost perfectly “dramatized” sense, in its highest and cinematic sense, where the “idea” is not expressed through words, but rather conveyed through images, visualized to be understood first with the heart, and then perhaps, and only secondarily, with the mind. In this aspect, *Your Name* excels as an exceptionally original work that defies conventions and embodies the unique extraordinariness mentioned earlier.



Tokyo's Hyperrealism in *Your Name*

In 2013, with the release of *The Garden of Words*, it was hardly conceivable to expect an improvement in the quality of animation technique and the level of detail in Shinkai's artwork and his team, which at the time seemed unsurpassable. However, they reached a lyrical quality bordering on calligraphy on more than one occasion, and only their focus on hyper-real urban landscapes prevented *The Garden of Words* from becoming mere self-indulgent aestheticism, producing only sensory illusions or, worse, mere naturalism (trailer of [The Garden of Words](#)). It is in this sense that, as previously mentioned, one of the strengths of *Your Name* lies in its stylistic balance. Indeed, *The Garden of Words* generally presents a graphic and/or animation detail even superior than *Your Name*'s ones, but in turn, the latter - thanks to a design that this time proceeds more through subtraction - always manages to avoid the trap, even just the sensation, of beauty for its own sake. Now, in fact, each individual image not only carries meaning (i.e., are *agentes*), but also fits with skillful craftsmanship into the peculiar emotional tone it is inserted in, within the poetic economy of the anime.



Opulentia exemplorum: frame from The Garden of Words, with a natural detail bordering on calligraphy.

And certainly, the most knowledgeable fans of the Japanese director will have noticed that *Your Name*, in the end, “says” nothing that Shinkai had not already expressed with his very first anime, the more than amateurish *Voices of a Distant Star* (2002), practically made by himself to the point of earning him the honorary epithet in Japanese popular culture of “one-man Gainax.”

And it is precisely with *Your Name* - through a creative hyperbole of inter-visual refractions - that it becomes apparent how in *Voices of a Distant Star* all the figurative and rhetorical tropes of Shinkai's animation machine were already starting to converge, and that the author will propose in every subsequent film, each time sublimating them into an epic of distance, incommunicability, loneliness, absence, and above all, forgetfulness (the latter, here, in *Your Name*, somehow reminiscent, perhaps, of something from that “tragedy of desire” called *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* [Shaft/Urobuchi, 2011]). It is in this sense, exactly like in any authentic *ekphrasis* (or, rather, in its “aesthetic reciprocal”) that meanings - especially the most hidden ones - emerge not from sensory stimulation as such, but from the composition and correlation of the diegetic, sensory and material elements of the aesthetic experience. This is how this complex web of references orchestrated through the use of a sublime that we have defined as hyper-real, allows for the transformation of perception into intellect, translating meaning through antiphrasis. One could say that, symbolizing “through,” it captures the essence without directly depicting it, approaching it in a way that defies translation into ideas, concepts, thoughts, or even abstraction. Precisely, solely symbolizing “through”, capturing a beauty that – as they would say in Japan - is always *guru furyu monji*, something that cannot be fully expressed through concepts, words, and letters, and therefore remains “ineffable”, comprehended only through aesthetic perception. A “truth” that is always an expression of an emotional intelligence that is never purely rational.

On the other hand, this is how it is, in the end, for all great authors, who, upon closer inspection, always say the same thing, but try to do it - one could say along with Hegel - not through the «tedious appearance of the diversity of a sterile *unum atque idem*, in the repetition of the identical in the guise

of different figurings», but through *similitudo dissimilis*, fluidifying it through a plastic expressive mode, for *enhypostasis* one might say, deepening it further, digging into its various facets and declining it according to similar but always different points of view; differentiating and reshaping it to make it evolve, move forward, and thus, each time anew, sublate it and recapitulate it.

Below is a short film made before the release of *Your Name*, which traces Shinkai's career and in which it is possible to notice the stylistic recurrences that pervade all of his films: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5BHSDhyV1Ig>

Well, now, in hindsight, *Voices of a Distant Star* reveals itself unmistakably as a true manifesto of Shinkai's interpretation of that distinctly Japanese aesthetic sensitivity of *wabi sabi/mono no aware*, terms that are difficult to translate but can be rendered as “beauty in/within sadness” or “beauty in/within imperfection/transience” of things; a sense of wonder for a beauty that, in its transience, is adorned with a sweet and serene melancholy. We use “in/within” because beauty in *wabi sabi* can be understood both in the sense that it is contextual and coextensive to the experience of sadness (and vice versa) and that it is within the very experience of sadness, intrinsically, essentially connected to it.

Because, if one looks at it closely, in the filmography of the director of Koumi, a clear, constant and tireless questioning about that lonely sadness, that infinite desire sometimes called love, emerges, and it resonates with the essence of *wabi sabi/mono no aware* itself, at least that particular one that Shinkai's poetics seeks to delve into more and more deeply.¹ Here in *Your Name*, to the extreme point of imagining such a symbiotic relationship that the very limit of every love is surpassed; limit that, every time, tells us that no matter how uniting, deep and intense a relationship may be, there will always remain that strange feeling, proper to those who love authentically; a pain, we might say, that the other is not me and that I am not the other, the wonder that our bodies and our persons always subsist differently, so that love can never be fulfilled, to discover that loving, loving deeply, actually means being alone. Painful wonder, which, however, precisely in the momentary “sublation” of every limit, reveals itself as its most fertile richness, the very substance of every love, at least of that which - in the always insurmountable, constitutive, subtraction of the other from oneself and of oneself from the other - is fulfilled in its never being fulfilled, in a desire that constantly feeds on its own desiring.

¹ For a brief exploration of the relationship between Shinkai and the aesthetics of *wabi sabi* and *mono no aware*, we refer to the appendix at the end of this writing.



Hyperreal Sublime: another frame from *The Garden of Words*, which, in addition to further highlighting the already mentioned artistic refinement of the graphic detail, if observed in sequence with the same perspective but during the rainy season, is able to convey, better than any words, the essence of *wabi sabi* and/or *mono no aware*. These concepts evoke a profound appreciation for the beauty found in the (sad and sweet) transience of things, capturing the beauty within sadness.

From here, we believe, also come the other topoi of Shinkai's poetics, such as the beauty of and in absence, and of and in waiting, of an absence that sometimes is more present than any presence, which gives meaning to the presence itself. What is, in fact, this desire/love, this absence of something that is not well known, except for what the two protagonists of *Your Name* feel when they no longer remember each other.

On the other hand, in *Your Name*, what is the thematic “thread” if not what in Shinto spirituality has been categorized as “musubi” or “musuhi”? Although in its original form “musubi” indicates the creative, genetic act that brings things into being, Shinkai, however, seems to want to make it rhyme with the term ‘musubu’, which can be rendered as ‘bond’ (not so much as a noun, but also, and especially, as a verb: the act of binding). In this way, Shinkai is able to render an entire poetic perception (that which “binds” all of his films), and for which the being of things exists, generates, solely in the relationship, in the binding – those “threads”, often elusive, mysterious, unconscious, and sometimes tragic and impossible – between people, as well as between man and nature, between nature and the divine, between the divine and man. Shinkai can thus interpret “musubi” as time, as the bond of temporality (past, present, and future) in a unity capable of transcending the classical space-time continuum. A temporality, in other words, that is radically different (angular, scalar, twisted, and hyperdimensional), beyond any merely linear or relativistic temporality.

It is also in this sense that in *Your Name*, it can happen that fantasy, high literary fantasy, converges with realism; not so much, however, in the sense of “magical realism” à la Murakami (who is also mentioned in *Your Name*, albeit fleetingly and moreover far from “magical” *Norwegian Wood*), but in the sense that realism intends in its oldest and deepest meaning, beyond any banalizing opposition with idealism, symbolism or mysticism (to which, if anything, “naturalism” and/or materialism should be opposed); that sense for which there is something truly present - indeed, real, from res, realis - beyond sensory data, another reality (*realiora*), more authentic, more fundamental, and which

always opposes mere appearance and what is ephemeral or trivial.

However, die-hard fans may have noticed a significant variation: unlike many of Shinkai's previous works, the protagonists of *Your Name* are finally afforded a more classic “happy ending”, albeit always tinged with an indelible veil of melancholy. If it had released just two years earlier, *Your Name* would likely have concluded a few minutes earlier, possibly with that laconic yet sublime (and indeed, hyperreal) scene on a Tokyo pedestrian walkway on a rainy day that suddenly turns into snow; this scene, moreover, is another representation of that line/bond that unites by separating and separates by uniting (a scene that also appears in other Shinkai films). Nevertheless, given not only the *dispositio*, the dynamics of events orchestrated since the first scenes, but also the rhetorical *inventio* itself, the anime could not have ended differently.

If it had released just two years earlier, *Your Name* would likely have concluded a few minutes earlier, possibly with that laconic yet sublime (and indeed, hyperreal) scene on a pedestrian crossing in a rainy day that suddenly turns into snow.



Pedestrian walkway under the snow (Makoto Shinkai, *Your Name*, 2016)



Pedestrian walkway under the snow (Makoto Shinkai, 5 Centimeters per Second, 2007)

After watching the movie, one should also be able to understand the reason why *Your Name* has become not only a huge commercial success but also a cultural phenomenon, almost an obsession in Japan (to the point that – faced with young people who, to the detriment of their school duties, kept going back to see the movie – Shinkai himself had to publicly ask them not to). This is because *Your Name* has managed to take the form of a collective catharsis, resonating at the same frequency as that place of consciousness of many Japanese people that was the Great Tōhoku Earthquake/Tsunami of 2011. The disaster of 2011, which still wounded many and left them in need of encouragement or, better yet, an 'enchantment' to not give up. The wound of the 2011 Tsunami, in fact, continues to bleed and evidently still in need of care, an encouragement or, better, an “enchantment” to not give up, to continue to “fight and always extend a helping hand” (Shinkai's own words and emphasis), hoping that, even if not immediately, one day it will be possible to (re)find what destiny seems to have separated, taken away.



Another hyperrealistic landscape of Tokyo in *Your Name*. Note here as well the presence of the trope of “lines.”

Therefore, it appears that Shinkai has indeed achieved the creation of his perfect film, as explicitly requested by producer Genki Kawamura in 2014. However, perfection in this context does not imply the absence of flaws, but rather the ability to transform any potential issues into an expression of its organic and complete “perfection”. Nonetheless, there is an undeniable fact: *Your Name* had at least one “objective” flaw, particularly for the Italian audience. This flaw lies in the limited three-day screening period, depriving the moviegoers of the opportunity to fully experience the film on the big screen. It is only in such a setting that one can truly appreciate the rare and perfect embodiment of a distinct Japanese emotional tone that *Your Name*, on big screen, allows us to perceive. That emotional tone, which in Japan is sometimes described through the term “yūgen”, which stems from its ritual and theatrical origins, making it challenging to translate into a single word. It encapsulates an ineffable beauty evoked by something profoundly mysterious, yet it touches us and resonates within us intimately, even without a clear understanding of its exact reason, much like Mitsuha and Taki experience.



Mitsuha: “Sometimes, in the morning, as soon as I wake up, I find myself crying without knowing why.”

Perhaps it's just because *Your Name* is nothing but a perfect epitome of the magic of cinema, one that is increasingly rare and capable of making us leave the theater with a mysterious and profound sensation of being somehow different, yet also closer to ourselves. Drawing us closer to that truth, which is sealed within the heart of each one of us and serves as a constant reminder that sometimes there is no greater pain than forgetting those we love.



Your Name: Musubi & Katawaredoki (among possible translations: the moment - always transitory - when the natural and supernatural meet and, precisely, intertwine)

Addendum

Shinkai and *wabi sabi/mono no aware*

It is impossible to summarize the complexity of the *wabi sabi* aesthetic in this context, and we will limit ourselves here to exploring some of the affinities that we believe can be found, between this particular Japanese sensibility, Shinkai's animatic poetics and the allegorical *agentes* he employs. Shinkai's visual poetics, in fact, can be seen as resonating with *wabi sabi*, a term, as we mentioned, that can also be translated as "sadness in things where what is less (their imperfection/transience) is more". On the other hand, within Japanese aesthetic culture, there exists a profound appreciation for the concept of "less is more". This sensibility embodies a unique ideal of beauty, where the inherent beauty of objects and experiences is found in their simplicity, imperfection, and transience.

Wabi sabi, in contrast to the Western aesthetic and its canonical ideals, can be seen as non-Platonic. It is not about the pursuit of an idealized perfection but rather finding beauty in the imperfections and impermanence of all things, embracing the transitory nature bestowed upon them by the passage of time. As the Russian poet Ivanov eloquently stated, "everything flows and passes, dies. Not only mighty trees, men and grass, but also the shining forms of poets pass and solemn deeds crumble". Therefore, *wabi sabi* can be paraphrased as a deep admiration for a Beauty that is inherently transitory, destined to fade away. Within Shinkai's poetics, this aesthetic sensitivity towards the transient nature of existence becomes a metaphor for being itself, expressing the ebb and flow of life and historical events. It encompasses aspects that may appear tragic and dramatic, expanding its scope to encompass all facets of existence. This is particularly evident in his exploration of love relationships, which possess an authentic and original sense of eroticism, often bound by their very transience and separation. Hence, it is no coincidence that the title of his 2007 medium-length film, *5 Centimeters per Second*, which technically refers to the speed at which cherry blossom petals fall, becomes, within the realm of Shinkai's poetics, a representation of the inevitable drifting apart of people.

All of this, which in Japanese is also expressed with the term *Mono no aware* (meaning an "intense emotionality - a beautiful sadness - towards the transience of things"), can be observed in Shinkai's films through his meticulous attention to detail. He not only focuses on the natural elements but also on ordinary, everyday objects, simple imperfections, and the subtle and sometimes elusive connections between small, everyday occurrences and historical events. It is a poetic exploration that harmoniously intertwines the small fragments of daily life, even those marred and aged by time, into a delicate balance. The decay and impermanence of these elements serve as the narrative thread, while the seemingly mundane phrases and the soul infused within each object, gesture, and word carry a universal and profound meaning.

But it is precisely in this context that the significance of hyperreal aesthetics emerges in Shinkai's works. It is thanks to the hyperrealism present in his anime that, by magnifying the smallest details of everyday life, they can appear even more authentic than reality itself (and at the same time, for the same reason, appearing unfamiliar and uncanny, as if we have never truly seen them before). But it's

not just that, because in doing so, Shinkai manages to surpass the boundaries of conventional realism. Through this hyperrealism, he not only portrays the external world with great precision and “realism”, but by making it hyperreal, he delves into the inner world of the protagonists' emotions and sensations, creating a profound and engaging experience for the audience. In short, hyperreal aesthetics allow Shinkai to go beyond mere replication of reality (thus escaping, even in this aspect, from Plato and Western aesthetic). It enables him therefore, to convey the idea of a beauty that is both simple and sublime, as well as the complexity of human experiences, exploring the nuances of connections between people, emotions, and the transient nature of life. Through the hyperrealism of the everyday and the infusion of a touch of supernatural and/or “magical realism”, Shinkai's anime invites the audience to contemplate the deeper layers of existence and human relationships, in the continuous intertwining of the mundane and the extraordinary.

Although we often treat the two concepts as synonymous, *wabi sabi* and *mono no aware* embody different nuances of aesthetic and emotional appreciation within Japanese culture. *Wabi sabi* celebrates the beauty found in simplicity, imperfection, and the fleeting nature of existence. It is a philosophy that cherishes naturalness and embraces imperfections as integral components of life. *Wabi sabi* manifests in various forms of art, design, and everyday living. On the other hand, *Mono no aware* refers to a profound empathy and awareness of the transient nature of things and human emotions. It is literally translated as “the awareness of impermanent beauty” and embodies an appreciation for the beauty tinged with sadness, knowing that everything is destined to pass. As depicted in Shinkai's works, this concept often explores the themes of ephemerality, nostalgia for what has been lost, and the inevitable drifting apart of individuals, even those deeply in love. Both concepts share an appreciation for the imperfections and transitory aspects of life, but they differ in emphasis. While *wabi sabi* emphasizes the acceptance of imperfections and the beauty found in simplicity, *mono no aware* focuses on recognizing and appreciating the emotions and beauty that accompany the ephemeral nature of existence.



It is not by chance, then, that the *Wabi sabi/Mono no aware* aesthetic often finds its stylistic mark - not only in Shinkai's works but also in images of nature such as gardens, rural landscapes, as well as in the representation of specific ceremonies or abandoned and ruined places. However, perhaps the most easily recognizable example, almost taken for granted, is the rapid blooming and withering of

cherry blossoms, which is also embraced as a universal symbol of Shinkai's poetry in *5 Centimeters per Second*.



Your Name: a typical setting of *Wabi sabi*.

In Shinkai's works, therefore, the focus on imperfection appears to be central, as *wabi sabi* can indeed be defined as an aesthetics of imperfection, or rather, perfection in imperfection. This is why, in *The Garden of Words*, rainy days take center stage, which is considered an excellent example of *wabi sabi*. However, above all, this aesthetics is expressed in a *topos* of Shinkai's poetics, namely the quest for beauty in solitude or in specific moments of solitude. It is not by chance, in fact, that the Japanese tagline for *The Garden of Words* (which, in our opinion, unfortunately was not included in the international edition) read: ***"The story of a lonely sadness ancient than love"***. In this case, Shinkai seems to play with the two Japanese words that signify love, namely "Koi" and "Ai", a wordplay that may elude those unfamiliar with the language. "Koi" is the term used to indicate love in the original Japanese language before the introduction of Kanji characters, and it specifically conveys "lonely sadness", a sadness derived from the yearning for an absent loved one. "Koi" can thus encompass both an infinite longing (reflecting the concept of desire fueled by its own yearning, evoking a particular understanding of the eternal and boundlessly melancholic nature of love) and the longing for someone in solitude (which further connects to the aesthetics of *wabi sabi/mono no aware*). Subsequently, the term "Ai" was coined in Japan, which generally signifies love in a more Latin/Western sense, with its romantic connotations and personal sacrifices, embodying the act of giving oneself to another.

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