

Article

Exploring Artistic Realism: A Mimesis-Based Study of Aesthetic and Human Connection

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Abstract: In the past few years, film theory has experienced incredible growth and transformation. In modern film theory, the analysis of the relationship that films have with their recipients is a key area of research. This study examines the aesthetics of Makoto Shinkai's anime and how it realistically depicts the outside world. Additionally, it will compare and contrast their investigations of this realism in his art style with selections from Shinkai's corpus of films. Harnessing the principles embedded in the concept of mimesis developed by Walter Benjamin, this paper uses a recipient-centred approach to cinema narrative. This study is significantly central to the art style rather than its structure by observing the characteristics of animation drawings and audio visual in the anime. The paper provides an insight into the connection between man and man-made, which unveils the familiarity we have with nature—justifying the hypothesis by employing the literary theory of Mimesis. It investigates the art style of Shinkai's animation that works as a special force to realize this connection. It will enable one to recognize the significance of his works in serving as a model that consciously or unconsciously influences the recipients to take note of and appreciate the mundane sights and moments of life around them.

Keywords: Anime, Makoto Shinkai, Mimesis, Walter Benjamin

1. Introduction

Many common terms can be used to refer to the subject of this paper—film, movie, cinema, 'film studies' is the generally accepted term for the discipline. It is important to specify that this area of film studies comes under a special category of film, i.e., anime or Japanese animation. Anime is a Japanese popular cultural product that is increasingly being accepted and spreading significant influence over the global community. An abbreviation of the English word "animation" adapted into the word "anime" arose later in Japan around the middle of the twentieth century [1]. It is important to draw attention to this cinematic genre since anime stands out from other types of animation in the West due to its aesthetic appeal. While Western animation or "cartoons" lack detail when it comes to hues and shadows, anime provides a sense of realism through their detailed character's features and backgrounds. Another distinction is that, in contrast to any Western animation, which is primarily intended for children, anime is made for adults, teens as well as children. Film study requires one to analyse beyond the literature, also focusing on aspects like camera angles, lighting, colour theory, mood, settings, sound elements, and for this paper, most importantly, drawings and animation. The exceptional works of animation artistry of renowned filmmaker and animator Makoto Shinkai are the area of study for this paper. The main reason for specifically choosing Shinkai's selected works to study, and no other animated Japanese works, in general, is because of the creative uniqueness of his art style. His films are easily distinguishable from the sea of abundant animated films that are seen today and represent the gold standard for their animated features. His emphasis on composition and settings, detailed attention to the mundanity that daily life holds, and a blend of nuanced sound effects set him apart from his contemporaries and make him an ideal case study. Accordingly, the many elements of film analysis that shall be viewed to analyze Shinkai's filmography will explore his cinematic representation of beauty in everyday life, immersive realism, escapism, and connection. It may better comprehend the recipient's growing fascination and connection with the otherworldly stories of his moving pictures by using the mimetic approach of Benjamin in this film analysis.

2. ART OF IMITATION AND REPRESENTATION

One of the ancient concepts in literary and artistic study, it is a way of thinking about a work of art and is used in practically all philosophical disciplines. The term "Mimesis" encapsulates the essence of imitation and representation in its linguistic embrace. Artist capture and interpret the world by mimicking and imitating nature, using their unique perspective to breathe life into their creations. The scope and significance of the idea go far beyond describing the relationship between an artist's images and reality. It describes things like artworks, as well as actions, that is, imitating another person. Mimesis as a concept has been studied through the ages by various philosophers, scholars, and artists in various contexts. The belief that art is an imitation, dates back to at least the 5th century BCE. This concept was introduced in literary theory by the Greek philosopher Plato, in his philosophical dialogues, *Republic*, between Socrates and his pupils. He argues that poetry, painting, theatre, and other forms of imitation, representing nature, are naturally lesser in quality compared to the original. He believes that art is essentially a form of imitation, asserting that it doesn't just replicate reality but suggests that even the entirety of reality itself is a form of imitation of an idea. All physical things as well as thoughts and ideas were merely the imitation of the actual forms.

Forms are the non-physical essence of all things, which a person is only able to catch a glimpse of through the imperfect reality of them. "The tragic poet is an imitator, and therefore, like all other imitators, he is thrice removed from the king and the truth?" [2]. In this way, art becomes a duplication of a duplicate, a twofold imitation of an ideal world that veers farther away from the truth, distorting reality to an even greater extent. The second idea concerning mimesis was proposed by Aristotle in *Poetics*. In debates on the ideals and principles of art, he had a favourable viewpoint on the concept of mimesis. "The instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated" [3]. He regards mimesis as a rational and fully valid practice, having its own internal rules and proper effects on human nature, which is contradictory to Plato's idea, which regards mimesis as a dangerous and potentially corrupting imitation of reality. "All poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearer" [4,5]. The philosophers Plato and Aristotle are acknowledged for laying the foundation of the mimesis theory, which describes mimesis as a kind of imitation of nature. However, in light of Aristotle's theory, mimesis means "Imitation" or "Mimicking" not in the sense of copying, but rather in the sense of representation. One could say that mimesis is the replication of an astounding variety of originals, including nature, truth, beauty, mannerisms, actions, instances, and thoughts. The idea that art is imitation has remained prevalent in Western philosophy throughout history. However, theorists have since formed different interpretations of the theory leading to extended concepts and new perspectives. Probably the most well-known component in the thematic complex of mimesis is artistic realism. Ever since the ancient times of Greece, writers and artists have attempted to convey reality more accurately and to advance both the imitation medium and the methods used for its accomplishment. Motion films were portrayed as an advancement over still photography, photography as a step forward from painting, and virtual reality as a revolutionary development above film. Without question, each approach has made it easier for the world to replicate the tangible and perceptible world. This idea argues that rather than merely denoting the realism of photography and film as a shift in medium or style or an inevitable evolution, it is a byproduct of classical Greek notions about images that signifies development in art and assists in exploring innovative methods to portray reality.

3. WHY BENJAMIN'S CONCEPT OF MIMESIS IS IMPORTANT FOR THIS STUDY?

Walter Benjamin offered a fresh perspective on the notion in his essay, *On the Mimetic Faculty* [6], arguing that mimesis is a fundamentally human quality that has evolved over time and that a human's capacity to mimic is determined by their expression and representation. Benjamin believes that the idea of mimesis enables one to identify with the outside world. "Insight into the realms of the similar is of fundamental significance for the illumination of major sectors of occult knowledge. Such insight, however, is gained less by demonstrating found similarities than by replicating the process which generates such similarities" [7]. He maintained that a piece of art might elicit a potent energy exchange between the observer and the artwork, much like the feeling of empathy. Humans develop empathy with the world through finding and creating connections. Similar to Aristotle, Benjamin believes that mimesis is a visionary act in and of itself—rather than only a replica of the original. Natural correspondences are given their true importance only if seen as stimulating and awakening the mimetic faculty in man. [8,9]. As per his statement, mimesis pertains to an interpretive procedure that involves creating a model of an object, which then serves as a vehicle for means of associating with the real object. The potential to establish a connection between oneself and another. Thus, Assimilation with the original object becomes the goal. Benjamin asserts, "Nature creates similarities," using mimicry as evidence. Nature produces parallels. However,

he contends that man has the greatest capacity for creating similarities (333). Humans have always had the ability to draw connections between things, including literature and art, as well as the ability to recognize them. A component of mimesis is the sensual correspondence experience. The idea of identification was a significant mimesis variant. In line with Benjamin, Astrology, imitative magic, and children's play are examples of "nonsensuous similarity" (334). This word refers to similarities between the animate and inanimate, the microcosm and the macrocosm, as well as similarities that are simply material. Mimesis has always been both an explicit or tacit theory of art and human nature. Therefore, mimesis might be seen as an execution that can be evoked by the creator of the artwork as well as by the recipient of that artwork [10]. Like Benjamin, Freud thought that empathy was possible via the power of art. "I believe that if ideational mimetics are followed up, they may be as useful in other branches of aesthetics" [11], he said, projecting the term's potential significance in the study of aesthetics. The principle of mimesis can extend to all forms of artistic expression. Thus, movies and other visual arts might be a part of its scope.

4. BRINGING SENSE TO THE FEELING OF FAMILIARITY WITH SHINKAI'S ANIMATION

The mimetic method is employed in Makoto Shinkai's anime-style study to describe the phenomena, that is, creating the model of the true world forging a link between oneself and other. Even if the setting in Shinkai's works is fantastical, he nevertheless aims to provide a realistic portrayal of ideas and morals in addition to realistic imagery. This attempt draws emotions from viewers and makes them assimilate with the original object or empathize with the real world through the discovery and creation of similarities. Makoto Shinkai is considered among the finest gifted animators. In addition to authoring screenplays and directing movies, he is also recognized for his voice acting, editing, digital graphic animation, and artwork creation.

There is no doubt in saying that his name will go down in history, separating him from his contemporaries not only for the reasons of do-it-yourself filmmaking but also for his art style, contemplative themes, focus on representing the detailed surroundings, lighting, colour theory, matching the moving pictures with identically defined synchronization sounds, and compelling music. His work attempts to ground you as firmly as possible into reality, despite metaphysical elements and dreamlike animation. He, similar to other modern animators makes use of some of the real locations of Japan in their animation drawings, where nearly every external location is a photo-accurate representation of a real world place. However, the stunning and shockingly accurate scenes borrowed from reality in Shinkai's real-life anime have made a sensation worldwide causing hundreds of fans to fly across the globe to visit the locations sketched in his film, for example, the iconic staircase (e.g. "Fig. 1" and "Fig. 2") in *Your Name* [12]. While other directors were inching toward more accurate drawings, Makoto Shinkai was clawing beauty out of the most mundane everyday sights and putting them on display from a perspective only he could capture.



Figure 1. Real-Life Staircase Location in Japan, which is Depicted in *Your Name* (Soriano, 2020, [12]).



Figure 2. The Animated Version of the Real-Life Staircase in Your Name (Your Name 01:40:46/01:46:35)



Figure 3. Photograph of Shinjuku Park in Japan, Illustrated in the Animation (Shinjuku, 2013, [9]).



Figure 4. Animation of the real-life park in The Garden of Words (Garden 00:02:29/00:45:51).

Shinkai clicks photographs and uses them as references for his artwork that shines through his drawings, providing an incredibly accurate depiction of real locations. His unique realistic art style, that is, photorealism, brought him to blur the line between animation and reality in his works. This photorealistic art style is suggestive in his depiction of one of the (e.g. "Fig. 3" and "Fig. 4") National parks of Japan in The Garden of Words [13]. The quirks in his art style separate him from his peers. The nuanced detail in each of his scenes, his gorgeous meticulously animated food, infatuations with weather, the theme of love and the melancholic, and the use of soundtracks purposely arouses the highest amount of emotions but above all else, it is his visuals that shows how he perceives the world beyond and around himself. For showing photorealism, which is the core of his visual style, he goes beyond artistic conventions and gives photorealistic detail to all the drawings, converting them into scenes from different angles. This provides a sense of capturing the world through the lens instead of a simple 2D drawing and bringing a depth of reality to all the little things that people miss to observe in their daily lives.



Figure 5. Photorealistic Animation of Raindrops in the Garden of Words (Garden 00:08:05/00:45:51)



Figure 6. Use of Lighting and Tyndall Effect in Animation Your Name (Your Name 00:13:10/01:46:35)

By making the foreground and background of his animation appear unfocused, much like real-life cameras, he adds depth of field (e.g. "Fig. 5"). Another important factor contributing to such an impression is light reflection. The way light interacts with the surroundings in his films is one way to recognize his works (e.g. "Fig 6"). If his movies had taken place in a generic setting, they wouldn't have had the same impact. His trademark photorealistic style helps create a more immersive and relatable universe that reminds the viewer that even with all the supernatural elements the movie is still rooted in humanity. His pursuit of realism is not just a hollow attempt at live action, he states that the setting of a film must allow the viewer to rediscover the beauty of places or nature [14]. The way he meticulously showcases Tokyo as grand and scary, filled with blinking lights and skyscrapers, highlights the bustling world and beauty of restless culture (e.g. "Fig. 8"). While not only provides the perfect depiction, but he also provides a hyper-idealised depiction, with bright clean cities and countryside. Nature is shown in almost every frame for the portrayal of an isolated town (e.g. "Fig. 7"). Its reality is presented with vibrant green and warm reds. Also, his portrayal of the weather charms and manages to spread the exact feeling of what it would be like to visit there.



Figure 7. Illustrating the Nature of the Countryside with Soft Light in Your Name (Your Name 00:29:56/01:46:35)



Figure 8. Animation Depicting the Vibrant Tokyo City with Bright Lights in Your Name (Your Name 01:28:59/01:46:35)

For Shinkai, character drawings seem to be a secondary consideration. However, as a storyteller, his background goes beyond simply being the places where the characters appear to live on screen. Those backgrounds can set up tones, mood, and atmosphere but most importantly the backgrounds are the window in the setting wherein can be a great visual representation of the character's emotions. For instance, the camera frequently focuses on skylines, isolated items, and landscapes in *The Garden of Words* rather than on people in the scenario. This underlines the theme of isolation and distance between characters [15].

Shinkai turns every day into the fantastical. He delights in everyday things that are often ignored (e.g. "Fig. 9" and "Fig. 10"), the way light reflects on a body of water, how it bounces off a faucet, or how snow sticks to a train window, rainwater beating up a twig branch, and dropping of petals from a tree, all those details contribute to the emotional buoyancy and that melancholy explored in these films.



Figure 9. Animation of Moonlight Shining Through Leaves in the Garden of Words (Garden 00:24:31/00:45:51)

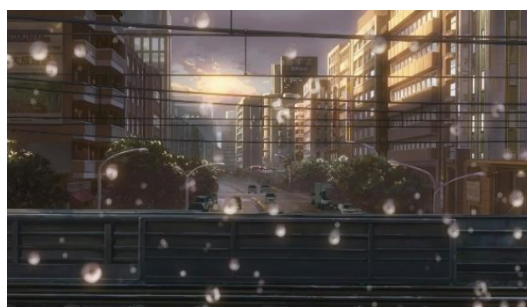


Figure 10. Animation of Raindrops on a Train Window Glass Depicted in The Garden of Words (Garden 00:12:13/00:45:51)

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper delves into the impact of the affective art style in the Japanese animation of Makoto Shinkai. Through employing Benjamin's idea of mimesis, one can grasp the process of connection human beings form with their environment and find meaning in it by recognizing something of themselves in it. Similar to art or literature, nature only has significance when it is actively made connection with. The act of observation brings pleasure and enrichment. The recipient can experience the connection through the displaying of exquisitely rendered scenes, the painstakingly detailed

animation of the close-up observational shots of the actual world, and the charmingly cleverly created visuals before the eyes. The overview that is offered is by no means comprehensive; just a select few of Shinkai's anime's artistic endeavours are taken into account, but they attest to the ongoing relationship between nature and art in the area of aesthetics.

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