

Manga as Visual Disaster Media and the Structural Inequalities It Exposes—Criticality of Disaster-Themed Animation and Post-3/11 Media Discourse

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How to cite this paper: Wang, X. D. (2024). Manga as Visual Disaster Media and the Structural Inequalities It Exposes—Criticality of Disaster-Themed Animation and Post-3/11 Media Discourse. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 12, 409-417.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2024.123022>

Received: July 1, 2024

Accepted: August 6, 2024

Published: August 9, 2024

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Abstract

This paper explores the unique role of manga as a visual media for disaster narratives, prompted by the 2011 Fukushima disaster. By analyzing the 2022 animated film “Suzume,” directed by Makoto Shinkai, the study highlights the distinct narrative techniques and perspectives manga offers. Released during the late stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and amidst the Japanese government’s announcement on nuclear wastewater, the film sparked significant social repercussions. This paper examines the dynamics of media discourse following disasters and the structural issues revealed, emphasizing the media’s role in exposing power dynamics, structural inequalities, and facilitating government relief and reform.

Keywords

Disaster Media, Manga, Visual Media, Post 3-11

1. Introduction

The 2011 Fukushima earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear disaster created a new space for new media work. Manga, as a popular medium of communication, has long been known for its ability to tell stories through visual narratives. Due to its close relationship with the Japanese cultural context, manga has different characteristics from other visual media when it comes to visual narratives (Ahmad, 2012). Most current studies focus on mainstream news media, films, or photographs. However, there is limited academic research on the importance of comics as a medium for visualizing disasters. Secondly, the arrival of disaster has

caused people to rethink what media is. The constant changes and updates in disaster media have also led to the realization that disaster media can help expose power dynamics and structural inequalities, and facilitate the practice of government relief and reform, among other functions (Parks & Walker, 2020).

Therefore, this paper is organized into the following sections, which analyze the narrative techniques and meaning construction in *Suzume*, a 2022 Japanese animated film. This coming-of-age fantasy adventure is written and directed by Makoto Shinkai. Firstly, what new perspectives does manga, as a unique visual medium for disaster, open up that are different from other forms of media? Additionally, *Suzume* represents more than just the message conveyed by the work itself. Following its release, it has had various social repercussions, coinciding with the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Japanese government's announcement regarding the release of nuclear wastewater. This paper thereby analyzes the dynamics of media discourse in the aftermath of the disaster and the structural problems it revealed.

Recall

Both professionals and amateurs shared their experiences of the 2011 aftermath across the Internet and traditional media, creating a communal space for individuals to process their losses together. The media has played a significant role in shaping the emotional narratives surrounding these disaster stories, influencing how people respond to such events through the information they disseminate.

Nuclear disasters are particularly vulnerable to stigma due to the scarcity of historical references, inconsistent expert opinions, and the rapid spread of rumors (Kwesell, 2022). Maeda and Oe (2015) note that communication issues between the government, the power plant, and mainstream media led to a lack of official information and limited narrative coverage for the public. Rausch illuminates the study of local newspaper coverage following the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, to identify post-disaster media trends and framing.

By examining three distinct post-disaster narratives and news trends through an analysis of columns, we observe a noticeable decline in the frequency of mentions related to the event in the news (Rausch, 2013). This decline suggests that traditional national media narratives constrain the expression of individual experiences and the formation of collective memories.

In an alternative approach to disaster media, Hayashi and Kimura (2008) developed a method to transform the past experiences of victims into educational resources aimed at increasing public awareness of disasters. Building on earlier research, Furukawa and Dension (2015) explore how Japan's popular media responded to the March 11 disasters by applying insights from discourse-based culture and industrial studies. Additionally, Ayaß (2020) examines the photographs taken and shared in the aftermath of Japan's 2011 earthquake and tsunami, which depict flooded landscapes, damaged homes, and distressed individuals. Ayaß (2020) argues that some images become iconic representations of disaster, entering collective visual memory. Lastly, Coates and Ben-Ari (2021) discuss the dual role of film as both a means of politicization and a way to evade

it. Their work is recognized as a valuable resource for understanding both the political and apolitical aspects of Japanese moving images, alongside supplementary analyses of other media, including a manga case study and the impact of these media products on the press and public opinion, all of which are thoughtfully considered in their book.

Manga, on the other hand, transcends all forms of media by exhibiting material frames and the gaps between them. It puts the act of framing and creation, as well as what framing omits, on paper. Manga draws attention to what lies outside the frame and how evidence is constructed. It highlights limitations in terms of visual efficacy, producing dynamic texts that aim to express the multi-layered historical context implied by the term “documentary.” The form of manga is defined by a self-reflexive awareness of the drawing apparatus.

2. When Anime Is No Longer about Superheroes, But Narratives of Disaster

Disaster studies require a catastrophe, and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake can be viewed as three separate but interconnected events—the offshore earthquake itself, the resulting tsunami, and the ensuing nuclear power plant disaster, which also be known as the 311 disaster or Fukushima disaster. In the post-Fukushima era, a great deal of media coverage, artwork, and movies have featured disaster narratives. Audiovisual media have served as tools for storytelling, communication, and documenting the disaster.

Hillary L. Chute is known in the field of comic studies for her original research and careful analysis of verbal-visual texts. In 2006, Chute and Marianne DeKoven co-edited a special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies*. In this way, Chute hoped to open up new spaces for the study of comics narratives. She argues that comics today are not only linked to superheroes or other aspects of popular culture. Instead, contemporary comics possess unique forms and narratives that, within the context of disaster, can articulate trauma and crisis in distinct ways compared to other media. For instance, comics utilize subjective and imaginative fictional storytelling techniques, along with metaphorical visual language. This sets them apart from other visual media forms, such as documentaries. In contrast to documentaries, comics do not merely record and present evidence through silence, but also focus on multi-layered horizons not expressed in documentaries, which, according to Stella Bruzzi, are the result of a collision between a machine and the subject being recorded. Comics, on the other hand, are defined more by a sense of self-reflection (Chute, 2016).

Suzume is a new anime film produced by Makoto Shinkai and released in 2022 (Shinkai, 2022). It has earned over \$322.9 million at the worldwide box office and is the fourth highest-grossing movie of 2022 in Japan. The film centers on Suzume Iwato, a 17-year-old high school girl, and Sota Munakata, a young man, as they travel around Japan in search of an open door that is causing havoc in their surroundings. This movie has been described as a response to the 10th

anniversary of the 311 disaster, and has been dubbed the “Disaster Trilogy” along with Makoto Shinkai’s first two films, *Your Name* (Shinkai, 2016) and *Weathering with You* (Shinkai, 2019). *Suzume* is the most representative and influential disaster-themed anime of recent times. This paper examines the narrative techniques in *Suzume* to outline the construction of meaning in visual media of disasters, a feat uniquely achievable through the medium of manga.

Since most animated works are fictional in nature, characterizations often have anthropomorphic human characters. When eco-film researchers analyze a film, they look at the cultural templates the films use in depicting natural phenomena, how they define human-non-human relationships, the extent to which they address ecological crises, and what kind of (environmental) ideologies they critique or encourage (Heise, 2014). Some have also argued that animated works express post-humanist ideas through these characters, “talking, acting animals, plants, and objects will make the viewer realize that human beings are only one of the manifestations of agency in animated fictional works (Eisenstein, 1988). Such narrative design challenges the anthropocentric notion that humans are superior and unique beings in nature. Instead, the animated work conveys the idea that all living things, including natural systems themselves, have energizing qualities. Humans can only at best speculate about these motivations, modes of being, and perceptions from their own (biological and cultural) perspectives (Eisenstein, 1988).

In *Suzume*, the hero’s soul is sealed in a three-legged bench. Makoto Shinkai (2023) explains the design of the small chair in an interview, “Suzume was a child when the earthquake hit, and the whole house was washed away. This little chair, which was a gift from her mother, was also washed away and lost one of its legs. This little three-legged chair actually symbolizes Suzume’s heart, because she lost her favorite mother in the earthquake, so she always has a sense of loss and insecurity.” (Los Angeles Times, 2023). Sota, the hero of the movie, spends most of his time imprisoned in a small yellow chair with one leg missing. This little talking, walking, and emotional chair is the main aid to the protagonist Suzume’s efforts to stop the earthquake by “closing the door”.



This scene depicts the small yellow chair that the male protagonist has transformed (Shinkai, 2022).

In *Suzume*, for instance, Shinkai personifies the earthquake disaster as
¹This is the little yellow chair that the male protagonist transformed into.

“earthworms,” giving earthquakes, which are invisible, a tangible body. The activity of earthworms often leads to a major earthquake disaster in a certain area. However, earthquakes represent the physical vibrations of the earth, and these vibrations are the most tangible and explanatory aspect of material movement. Earthquakes are therefore anthropomorphized into the visual image of the earthworm, and Suzume stops earthquakes by fighting against “earthworms”.



This is the scene in the movie that visualizes earthquakes as “earthworms” (Shinkai, 2022).

Janet Walker emphasizes that “the media are active participants in the social construction and material production of the world” (Chang et al., 2019). Amid a catastrophe, where humans are the most powerless and insignificant subjects, Shinkai expresses a non-anthropocentric attitude through the design of human and non-human characters, and the narrative of the conflicts between humans and nature. That is, this movie criticizes the obsession with progress, super-consumerism and the idea of human supremacy. This is Makoto Shinkai’s first direct reference to the events of 311, rather than through metaphorical references like his two previous works, *Your Name* and *Weathering with you*. We see the possibilities of comics as a disaster medium. It is not enough to just provide information or tell environmental stories. While Suzume’s work focuses solely on portraying the earthquake as a natural disaster in the 311 incident, it inevitably brings to mind the subsequent worst secondary disaster caused by the earthquake and tsunami: the nuclear explosion and contamination, still widely debated in the post-311 era. From the occurrence of the nuclear disaster to the subsequent disposal of people and nuclear contamination, the 311 nuclear contamination can be regarded as a typical man-made disaster, which is still occurring continuously today. This paper thus further argues that animated works such as *Suzume*, as visual media of disaster, bring a critical significance that goes beyond the work’s own unequal power dynamics between humans and nature. There are also more functions and possibilities for promoting public critique of real social events. This prompts us to reconsider our perception of our connection to the non-human world and the media we utilize to comprehend it, as well as to reevaluate and redefine the ecological and environmental metaphors com-

²Earthquakes are visualized into “earthworms”.

monly employed in media studies history (López et al., 2024).

3. Media Discourse after the 311 Disaster

Lisa Parks and Janet Walker argue that disaster media can be defined as an inspiration, it is a way in which natural and man-made disasters are disseminated, constructed, and exacerbated or mitigated in different ways through media means. Media can help reshape dire environmental, emotional, and economic situations. It fosters a focus on new models of disaster relief and environmental justice. During a disaster, the media breaks free of the screen and has an impact on the public environment (Parks & Walker, 2020). *Suzume* contains a social element that has not been present much in Makoto Shinkai's previous work, as opposed to his more personal work. In *Suzume*'s journey to stop earthquakes across Japan by "closing the door" along the way. We follow *Suzume* through Kobe, Tokyo, and all the way to Fukushima on 3/11, where Shinkai delivers one of the most memorable narratives in the movie. The beautiful idyllic landscapes that had been destroyed were recolored green and brought back to life. Shinkai said in an interview that his motivation for creating *Suzume* was to think about the responsibility he should take as a creator of entertainment films after a disaster. As a result, he created this movie. It has been 12 years since the 311 disaster. At the same time, people had just experienced the COVID-19 global pandemic. Perhaps it is the most appropriate time to bring this work to the public, because, at this time, it can convince people that although there are still many disasters happening in the world, people can choose to cherish the little happiness in their daily lives.

However, after *Suzume* was shown, it did not have the "warm" and "healing" effect that Shinkai expected. Instead, the audience's negative comments on the movie were not directed at *Suzume*'s specific filming techniques. On the contrary, some viewers made emotional comments after watching *Suzume* because they were reminded of the secondary disasters that occurred in the post-311 era. After *Suzume* aired, the Japanese government announced that on August 24, 2023, it would officially start the discharge of the Fukushima nuclear waste water into the sea, which would mean the disposal of the Fukushima disaster into the Pacific Ocean. This news caused an uproar in the international community, especially in Japan's neighboring regions. Thus, in *Suzume*'s comment section, we can see the following remarks. For example, "It's so touching that a natural disaster like an earthquake can be stopped, but a human-made disaster like nuclear wastewater can't be stopped". "It's ironic to see *Suzume* on a day when nuclear wastewater is being discharged". "*Suzume* is a Fukushima propaganda movie, shooting the earthquake scene, but not mentioning the nuclear power plant leakage and nuclear wastewater dumping. It's unbelievable that the final narrative climaxes with Fukushima getting the Fukushima contamination fixed in Fukushima". *Suzume* is not the first anime that has provoked "public outrage" from viewers and criticized the reality of society. *Godzilla* (Gojiro) is one of Ja-

pan's most recognizable monster movies. In the old version of *Godzilla*, the monsters were portrayed as dinosaurs that survived the Jurassic Century 2 million years ago and were transformed into even more destructive horrors by the effects of atomic bomb radiation. This classic monster image was bred from the Japanese nuclear fears. In the new version of *Godzilla*, *Shin Godzilla*, it is given a new metaphorical meaning. This film rather bluntly mocked the ineffective decision-making of Japanese bureaucrats, representing the public's distrust of the government's ability to respond to crises (Anno & Higuchi, 2016). Similarly, viewers commented like "I sense that there are already creatures mutating into *Godzilla* at the bottom of Japan". "*Godzilla* should go swimming in the Pacific Ocean to absorb the nuclear radiation."

Disaster media representations have brought to light the structural problems of the aftermath of a disaster, and the importance of relief and reform (Parks & Walker, 2020). A book titled *Meltdown* is a compilation of interviews with 200 people involved in the aftermath of the nuclear disaster by Asahi Shimbun's reporter Yasuaki Oshika, who pulls no punches in exposing the fact that the nuclear contamination caused by 311 was a man-made disaster more than a natural one. Oshika further points out that amidst all the opposition and calls for disaster, Japan's "elites" are still considering how to use the incident as a prop for arm-twisting with political opponents or rivals. Despite the successive explosions of nuclear power plants, contaminating the country and disrupting the lives of many internationally, the Ministry of Economy, Trade, and Industry (METI) (経済産業) remains indifferent, positioning itself as much of a perpetrator as TEPCO (Tokyo Electric Power Company) (Oshika, 2012). In September 2022, a network news outlet reported that Japan's Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (農林水産省) had met with the head of a Fukushima fisheries group and said that efforts would be made to eliminate the negative impact on the image of the local fishing industry caused by the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water into the sea. It also said that the Japan Reconstruction Agency (復興庁) had also decided to publicize Fukushima food in the future by placing promotional reports in overseas media and through introductions by Internet celebrities. The public's reaction on social media was, "Any self-published media outlet that takes on this kind of work should be prepared to lose their reputation". Disaster media are no longer passive conveyors of news but rather autonomous platforms that take a stance on various issues. In particular, animation, film, etc. critically engage with disaster, for example, by generating disaster-related knowledge as well as by materializing disaster-related narratives. Disaster media can shape post-disaster contexts and prompt public reflection on the revelations exposed by the disaster. The media has become an important cognitive and political tool that allows the public to recognize the intrinsic and structural problems of disaster occurrence. Therefore, more and more forms of disaster media should be included in the discussion in order to resist, intervene and improve the status quo (Parks & Walker, 2020).

4. Conclusion

How do we view disaster media today? Even after the Fukushima City nuclear power plant disaster involving the Tokyo Electric Power Company, nuclear power plants remain in operation today, with new constructions underway. The tense we need to use in telling the story of the Fukushima disaster remains the present tense in the present of the nuclear wastewater treatment controversy. In order to mitigate and adapt to the disaster, citizens need reliable critical information. It is especially important to have a media that is free from commercial, conspiracy theories and government interests. At this moment, we acknowledge the immense potential of manga as a medium for disaster communication, extending beyond news media literacy to encompass alternative green media approaches diverging from mainstream discourse. These avenues can contribute to disaster ecology research.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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