Weathering With You: Climate change and fatalism

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Written and directed by Makoto Shinkai

In mid-January, movie theaters in the United States, Canada, the UK and elsewhere began screening the new Japanese animated film *Weathering With You*, which was released in Japan last July.

The film has been selected as the Japanese entry for the Best International Feature Film award at the 92nd Academy Awards. It is the third anime film in history to receive four Annie Award nominations (prizes awarded annually by the Los Angeles branch of the International Animated Film Association), the other two being *Spirited Away* (2001) and *Millennium Actress* (2001).

Weathering With You, written and directed by Makoto Shinkai (*Your Name*), is set in modern Tokyo, during a summer of record-breaking rainfall. The central protagonist is a high school freshman named Hodaka (Kotaro Daigo), a runaway who arrives in Tokyo and lives on the streets until he finds employment working for a small publishing company. One of his tasks is to help investigate urban legends relating to the unusual weather.

Circumstances bring Hodaka into contact with a teenaged girl named Hina (Nana Mori), who they discover is a "sunshine girl" (a playful pun on Japanese pop culture) who through prayer can make the sun shine temporarily in her location. Hodaka and Hina, both leading a precarious existence, put together a business selling Hina's unique powers and are able to make money by bringing sunlight to markets, birthday parties and other such events.

Over time, Hina discovers that her body is gradually turning into water and evaporating the more she prays. This is reminiscent, it seems, of a legendary weather maiden, who can control the weather, but ultimately serves as a sacrifice to bring sunshine to her people. Hina decides to sacrifice herself, through prayer, to eradicate the nasty weather plaguing Tokyo, which subsides. However, Hodaka, through a romantic impulse, enters the spirit world and brings her back, leaving the city in a permanent state of inundation, including a sea level increase of dozens of meters.

From a technical standpoint, *Weathering With You* is breathtaking and beautiful, especially when viewed on a large screen. The detail and care given to the characters and settings, as well as more complicated elements like raindrops and storm clouds show what those with tremendous talent can do given the latest technological achievements. The artists were able to depict Tokyo as a contradictory place that contains some picturesque neighborhoods, but also others dangerous, dirty and vile.

With his technically higher-quality features, Shinkai is a rising star in Japanese animation, on his way perhaps to becoming a new Hayao Miyazaki (born 1941), the legendary filmmaker and animator (*The Castle of Cagliostro*, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Princess Mononoke*, *The Wind Rises*).

In fact, many members of Studio Ghibli, Miyazaki's famous studio, joined Shinkai to create his latest films. Prior to the release of this latest film, the director and writer was best known for writing and directing *Your Name* (2016), currently the highest-grossing anime film of all time.

Shinkai's films generally have revolved around teenage romance coupled with loss. In *5 Centimeters per Second* (2007), he told a tale about two teenagers who drift apart after one relocates to another prefecture. His *Your Name* (2016) recounts the story of a teenaged couple who somehow switch bodies across time and space and slowly fall in love with one another.

Weathering With You is aimed more at a general

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audience, and, while it does contain some romantic elements, its main themes have more to do with the dangers of climate change and the fortunes of impoverished children. Hina, who is a minor, has quit school to work illegally on the streets to take care of her little brother after they lose their mother the previous year. She confronts the harsh reality of part-time wage labor and the danger of sex trafficking as she struggles to survive.

In an interview with Shinkai that followed the first US screenings, he explained that he purposefully depicted the weather as very violent and dangerous in this film. There are many scenes where Tokyo is flooded with rainwater. People walk around in ankle-deep and even knee-deep water, and underground apartments become completely flooded. This is intentionally placed in juxtaposition to weather as something that is beautiful, which is usually how seasons are depicted in Japanese animation. Shinkai points out that weather has today become something that Japanese people have to prepare for and fear.

Shinkai should be lauded for depicting such a new critical element of Japanese life in his film, yet the main weakness is that rather than depicting the extreme weather conditions as being the result of human-induced climate change and the capitalist profit system, the storms and dangerous rainfall are imbued with a supernatural malevolence. Unbeknownst to the rest of the population, the reason the rain continues to fall on Tokyo and increase the sea level to devastating heights is due to the decisions of a young girl with mystical powers and the selfish desires of a single boy in love.

The effects of humans upon the environment are generally downplayed. During the epilogue to the main drama, Hodaka speaks to an elderly woman who assures him that, in centuries past, Tokyo was just a bay filled with water—just as it had become by the end of this film—and that what they are seeing is just nature moving through its fluctuating periods that far outstretch the lives of humans. One character during the story points out that the perception of weather events "in recorded history" are short-sighted and do not account for the long geological history of which humans are but a blip.

One could look at *Weathering with You* as an allegory, one in which the teenaged runaway, who appears to come from an affluent family, sacrifices the safety and well-being of millions of people for his own selfish interests. However, the final point seems to be that humans do not really impact that heavily upon nature and that nature is more powerful and beyond the control of humans—something to be worshiped and revered rather than meddled with directly.

This is very much in line with much of Japanese film and television, entangled with Shintoism and various other forms of animism and which dwell on how "natural" forces and spirits play on everyday human life. Emotional problems, especially of youngsters, are expressed physically through supernatural means to provide morality tales for an adolescent audience. The remarkable artistry and technological prowess notwithstanding, this is a pretty miserable perspective at this moment in history, fatalistic, resigned and unable to confront harsh social reality in the face.

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