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Suzume: Fantasy as a Platform for Queer Assimilation

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Abstract

This paper investigates queer representation in the 2022 Japanese animated film *Suzume* directed by Makoto Shinkai. This paper examines *Suzume*'s use of a sentient, three-legged chair as a metaphor for a queer relationship, shedding light on the realities of queer life in 21st-century Japan. Additionally, referencing queer theories (such as the “good homosexual”) and the role of privacy norms in Japan, this paper explores the oppression and simultaneous assimilation of queerness in Japan. To fully understand the origins and effects of *Suzume*, this paper uses movie reviews, LGBTQIA+ academic journals, narratives from queer Japanese individuals, etc. This research confirms that Japan's social code around queerness is inherently oppressive but also reveals that in return it evokes unique forms of queer exploration. Japanese social norms limit individual expression, both physically and emotionally, but simultaneously encourage the birth of these nuanced discussions via various forms of abstract media. While many approaches to queer advocacy are direct and vocal, Japan's balance between assimilation and acceptance has fostered innovation for unusual approaches to understanding queerness such as *Suzume*. *Suzume* effectively navigates the struggle in both the entertainment industry and the individual experience of concealing queer identities, ultimately warning against the silence of queer expression and discussion.

Introduction

Suzume effectively illustrates what the twenty-first century would look like with magic by utilizing social media to turn its main characters (a talking cat and a three-legged chair) into niche internet celebrities. The film opens with Suzume, a high school girl who mysteriously lost her parents at a young age, having an eerie dream of herself as a child searching for her mother in a beautiful fantasy world. Later that morning, Suzume's attention is captured by a mysterious young man named Souta. Although he doesn't conform to Western standards of big muscles and short hair, Souta is still strikingly handsome. With black shoulder-length hair constantly flowing in the wind, a sharp jawline, soft eyes, and a single mole under his left eye, he is sure to be a heartthrob for both Suzume and the audience.



The first shot of Souta in *Suzume*

Out of curiosity, Suzume ends up tracing Souta's footsteps to some abandoned ruins where she pokes around, eventually stumbling over an isolated door which leads to the world from her dream. She also picks up a ceramic cat, later named Daijin, that comes to life and runs away.

Scared and confused, Suzume takes off leaving the door open and the cat missing. A few hours later, Suzume notices an ominous cloud-like “earthworm” (*mimizu*) emerging from the ruins and rising into the sky. As the scene, Suzume finds Souta struggling to close the door she left open, which allowed the *mimizu* to escape. Within seconds of recognizing Souta’s dangerous situation, Suzume runs to his side to help. Although they succeed in locking the door shut, they fail to do so before the *mimizu* falls to the earth causing an earthquake. It is then revealed that Souta is a closer – responsible for ensuring Japan’s safety by traveling to lock these magical doors concealing *mimizu*. Finally, to conclude the movie’s introduction, Souta is turned into a sentient three-legged chair by Daijin.



An image of Souta running as a three-legged chair posted on *X*

The film goes on to follow Suzume and Souta as they chase Daijin across the country and stop *mimizu* from falling to the earth as they go. Throughout their time together, Suzume and Souta share their struggles and grow a strong connection, leading to a heart wrenching climax when Souta begins to lose himself to his inanimate body.

Suzume is just one of many successful Anime films released in the last decade. Although its make-believe fantasy and cliché romance are not unique, its director’s approach to a more

complex commentary on queer society in Japan takes this film to the next level. *Suzume's* director, Makoto Shinkai, uses Souta's form as an inanimate object to question the role of a man in taking responsibility and action. One understanding of Shinkai's choice is that the situation allows Suzume to grow as an individual and reveals that her success is not dependent on the help of a man. Alternatively, Suzume's increased responsibility due to Souta's decreased capabilities may be viewed as a burden rather than a growth in Suzume's strength, emphasizing Souta's usual strengths as a man.

The chair must also be considered as a tool purely for entertainment. Because the imagination is such a common resource in Anime, it could be argued that Souta being a chair is just a form of surrealism. However, a fan theory behind Shinkai's decision in making Souta a chair proves otherwise. *Suzume* fans drew the connection between the producers of *Suzume* (CoMix Wave Films) and Japanese social norms regarding queerness and privacy to infer that Shinkai intended to feature a lesbian romance but was stopped by his producers. As a solution, fans suggested that Shinkai opted to make Souta a chair if he were forced to identify as a man. In an interview with *Looper*, Shinkai described how he wanted to depict "Suzume and another girl journeying" (Baron, 5) instead of his typical heterosexual romance. He also considered "had [Suzume] been a boy or had she been non-binary" (5), *Suzume's* storyline would still work. One user on *Reddit* discussed how the film's focus on unresolved trauma with Suzume's single aunt and deceased mother would have been more consistent had Souta been "an aspirational role model who has had similar experiences due to being another girl with similar trauma" (Rarietty).

Having to portray a queer relationship by using an inanimate object instead of a human is not surprising for Japan. Although queerness has been extremely well-documented and existed since the Edo period (1603-1868), there remains heavy stigmatization on queer expression and

discussion. Additionally, traditional Japanese social norms consider all conversations about sexual activity (regardless of gender and sexual orientation) taboo and are therefore infrequently discussed. With this combination of lasting stigmatization and rejection of sexual discussion, the silence of queer identities and experiences has become cemented in Japanese social norms. To remain closeted has become a form of survival for the queer community in Japan, ensuring their acceptance socially, job security, and the safety of their lives. For the Anime industry, this has meant representing almost-queer relationships using unconventional means, in this case using a chair for a person. Other Animes such as *Banana Fish* and *Yuri on Ice!* have similarly represented queer relationships in the form of extremely close friendships that border romantic feelings.

Although *Suzume* and Shinkai's work are universally recognized for their seamless pairings of the real-world beauty of Japan with heartbreaking high school romance, this project instead focuses on the more discreet messages of the film: how the use of Souta as a chair addresses the silence and simultaneous assimilation of queerness in Japan. By diving into the background of Shinkai's success and the history of queerness in Japan, this research reveals that Japan's social code around queerness is both positive and negative. It obviously limits individual expression, both physically and emotionally, but simultaneously encourages the birth of these nuanced discussions via various forms of abstract media. While other queer communities have taken a more straightforward approach to queer advocacy with queer liberation movements, Japan's balance between assimilation and acceptance has fostered innovative approaches to understanding queerness such as *Suzume*.

The Success of Makoto Shinkai & the Anime Industry

Known as the “undisputed visual champion of the anime form” (Schley, 7), Shinkai has a reputation for his ability to showcase both the beauty of Japan and make-believe fantasy worlds. Over his almost 30-year career, his creativity and dedication have given him the skills to be a successful director and creative. From his very first film, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days* (2004), Shinkai took on every role including, art, storyline, music, editing, etc. Although his visuals were appealing, his storylines seemed to lack as they were repeated. He became known for predictable romances of two characters being pulled apart by larger forces then brought back together to leave a hopeful and happy message. Similarly, Shinkai’s early films lacked animation and had much simpler movements. However, with the production of *Your Name* in 2016, his most popular film to date, Shinkai was able to address the artistic flaws in his previous works. While *Your Name* was produced, *Studio Ghibli*, Shinkai’s biggest competitor, had paused all of their productions, allowing Shinkai to employ many largely renowned animators in the Anime industry. *Your Name* ended up grossing over four hundred million internationally, skyrocketing Shinkai’s popularity. Followed by *Weathering with You* in 2020, Shinkai’s success remained but to a much lesser degree. The film grossed half of what *Your Name* did due to the poor planning and unfortunate timing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, *Weathering with You* carried on Shinkai’s simple romances, underscoring his repetition and predictability to his now larger audience. However, *Suzume* addressed Shinkai’s final flaw by transferring the focus from the romance to its effects on its characters. With this development, the film can focus on Suzume’s individual journey about tragedy and grief while also questioning the roles of physical presentation and gender in her relationship with Souta.

Shinkai's rise to fame additionally reflects the recent growth in Anime's popularity. Anime has existed for over a century but has recently grown by 118% over the past 2 years and doubled to 22.1 billion dollars between 2009 and 2019 (Brezeski, 2). Further, as the production of sitcoms and reality TV were significantly delayed during the COVID-19 pandemic, Anime became the "most Covid-resistant form of popular entertainment" (1). Anime differs both logistically and artistically from Western Hollywood. Unlike Western films, Anime's growth can be largely attributed to its growing fan culture. As the conventional perception of Anime as a "nerdy" genre has faded away, it has begun to be embraced across more varied demographics. Because Anime viewers have grown internationally, larger companies and streaming platforms have been incentivized to invest more, ultimately growing the industry's platform and allowing it to reach larger audiences.

A brief history of queerness in Japan

Although queerness in Japan has existed and been well-documented since the Edo period, queer Japanese activism, as opposed to the West, has been slow to gain traction and create unity. Historically, Japan has never utilized their government structure or legislation to oppress queer expression or activities. Additionally, unlike Western cultures, Japan lacks a larger moral authority, such as religion, pronouncing queerness as sinful. The absence of these organized sources of suppression has resulted in a lack of cohesive movements for queer liberation. This trend bled into World War II where homosexual relationships were understood as situational for Japanese men due to the gender segregation. Because only men were drafted to the military for the Pacific War in the 1940s, it became common for older soldiers to have sexual relationships with younger soldiers who resembled women. Mirroring the Edo period's understanding of

sexuality, there continued to be “no normative connection...between gender and sexual preferences” (McLelland, 330).

After WWII, Japanese science began to expand into queer sexology, publishing studies on homosexuality and transgenderism. However, with the influence of Western knowledge, Japanese doctors began introducing a distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality, finally establishing homosexuality as a formalized category of sexuality. This marked the beginnings of queer activism in Japan and became a catalyst for increased queer visibility. However, these queer activist groups continued to be segregated by gender. As lesbian activist groups struggled financially, activist groups of queer men were much more successful. When the two groups did come together to form the Japanese branch of the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA), tension remained eventually leading to the collapse of ILGA Japan.

As with many countries, the AIDS epidemic in Japan provided an opportunity for oppression against homosexual relationships. By pinning the blame for the AIDS epidemic on gay men, Japan’s government made their perspective on queerness clear: “The Ministry of Health and Welfare from 1985 to 1993 together with the AIDS Prevention Law passed by the government in 1988 identified ‘male homosexuality’ itself as one of the fundamental routes for HIV infection” (337). Despite knowing the true cause of the AIDS epidemic in Japan was contaminated blood products from their pharmaceutical companies, the Japanese government continued to accuse gay men.

Advocacy for queer freedom in Japan is still decades behind the West. Major factors such as an absence of unified movements and the inability to describe queerness itself, have had lasting impacts to this day. This has generated a shared silence of queerness, resulting in poor public awareness and insufficient discussion surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues. Without both the

resources and reason to come together, queerness and the queer community in Japan remain heavily stigmatized.

The Closet: The Importance of Privacy to Queer Survival

Being “closeted” means that you haven’t “come out” (announced your queer identity) to the people around you; this may include family, friends, coworkers, or even strangers met in passing. Historically, the secrecy of queerness has been a choice made out of survival because of discriminatory policies, widespread homophobia, etc. However, now coming out of the closet has become a choice for many. With a huge increase in DEIS work and queer advocacy, Western culture has begun normalizing the social right to choose when, where, and how one comes out. With the integration and acceptance of LGBTQIA+ identities being extremely recent, the safety ensured with coming out remains a privilege, not a right. In Japan, the closet is still “framed not as an ethical debate but an absolute” (Doi-Benson, 91). With malicious forms of outing becoming an increasingly concerning cause for suicide, this “absolute” was promoted across Japan as a legal campaign. Although Japan’s legislation has made the appearance of protecting the lives of queer people, it concurrently enforces the silence of queer people. Anya Doi-Benson, a humanities professor at the Center for Global Education and Japanese Studies at Doshisha University, criticized this method of ensuring the safety of queer individuals: “That outing someone could lead to death is mentioned often in these works; that an inability to talk about one’s personal life with others could lead to death is not” (96). Doi-Benson highlights the dangers of silence, even if it exists without the disgust and fear of an oppressive legislation.

Yet, this silence, the driving principle of being closeted, isn’t limited to queer identities in Japan. As noted by Doi-Benson, Japanese entertainment “often avoids portrayals (or even discussion) of sexual activity regardless of the gender or sexual orientation of those involved”

(98). Therefore, perhaps the silence around queer sexualities is a form of normalizing queerness. If queerness were instead to be headlining newspapers and made a spectacle of curiosity – for example by religious authorities – queer individuals would become further alienated from the larger heteronormative population. Although “the expression of private sexual practice has tended to be overlooked by both state and religious authorities” (McLelland, 330), queerness is still perceived as inappropriate. So, it must be asked: how can we accept queerness in its authentic form without silencing it? *Suzume* suggests the answer to be a derivation of assimilation.

Physical presentation: as a human, a chair, and a “good homosexual”

Anime is known for having both unique and unusual character designs. From invisible blue demons to talking slimes, Anime has explored characters that Western Hollywood is too scared to take a risk on. Compared to Hollywood, Anime is not all about glam or showing the prettiest faces. Although *Suzume* does adhere to the traditional outline of a model (young, tall, skinny, flawless skin), the roles they play are not what you would expect. *Suzume* makes a point to contrast the usual appearances of the strong versus the weak. For example, in classic hero movies “the protagonists are usually dressed in spandex rather than school uniforms” (Burt, 2), but even as a high school girl, Suzume is clearly capable of adapting in harsh situations – standing up for who she loves and confronting her lasting grief of her deceased mom.

Furthermore, Suzume takes the lead in this film, pushing Souta’s traditional role (as a man) to the side even though he is arguably stronger and better equipped for the strange conditions of their magical world. Suzume’s strength and adversity contrast her frail body, highlighting her independence and individuality unaffected by her love interest Souta. On the other hand, Suzume is still a child, reliant on Souta’s instructions and experience. Because Souta can still

communicate effectively in his chair form, he is able to maintain control over their situation. With more knowledge on the magical world of *mimizu*, he commands Suzume and acts as a source of urgency throughout their adventure. One could assume had Souta not been a chair, he may have taken a more prominent role in their journey, consequently reducing Suzume's role to a romantic interest.

While Suzume's and Souta's romance simply strays away from the power dynamics of a traditional heterosexual relationship, their dynamic simultaneously interrogates homosexuality more quietly. To draw attention away from the queer emblem imposed by the chair on their relationship, Shinkai repeatedly emphasized the importance of "a human overcoming something" (Baron, 6) rather than a commentary on sexuality and gender. While this firm response to the allegations of Souta's queerness may have deterred some audiences, diehard fans, such as myself, persisted in their investigation. Although Souta, a clearly cis-coded man, is introduced in place of another woman, he is transformed into an object (specifically, a chair) very early in the plot. While the chair is meant to be a functional object, it has been worn down through use to the point that it lost a leg. Its ability to remain standing on three legs is an image of lack – evidence that Shinkai's choice to transform Souta was not purely for entertainment. He uses Souta's effeminate attractiveness and the chair's absent leg as a softened method (more appropriately appealing to the Japanese audience) to "queer" the normative "boy meets girl" (5) narrative.

The film's indirect exploration of queer relationships is supported by its use of metaphorical representation (the chair) rather than an explicit same-gender relationship. This aligns with the concept of the "good homosexual," as described by Carol Johnson, professor of politics and international relations at the University of Adelaide. She defines how the "good homosexual" "reinforces heteronormative conceptions of citizenship" (Johnson, 320) by

adhering to societal norms, often at the cost of authentic self-expression. This can best be seen in the form of passing as heterosexual. By withholding from queer activities in public, such as public displays of affection or even holding hands, queer individuals partake in appearing to be a “good homosexual” as a method of social survival. In this case, Shinkai’s decision to make Souta a chair instead of another girl perfectly illustrates this dynamic. The deviance of Souta’s physical appearance as a chair parallels queerness in a playful manner, masking the queerness in Suzume and Souta’s relationship with an inanimate object. In this way, *Suzume* abides to the careful etiquette of Japanese culture, simultaneously suggesting and denying the presence of queer relationships in this mainstream film. From *Suzume* alone, it is evident that assimilation, and ultimately passing as heterosexual, is key to surviving not only in entertainment, but also social life.

Deviancy in the Three-Legged Chair

As a social species, humans crave emotional connections. *Suzume* takes this desire beyond humankind to everything around them, regardless if it is alive or inanimate. One example is material objects and their capacity to become mementos – a physical reminder of people or memories that can no longer be reached. *Suzume* showcases the possibilities for forgotten mementos to be given another life. The viral three-legged chair in *Suzume* is actually from Suzume’s childhood. Although Suzume is in high school now with no use for a broken kid’s chair, she never got rid of it, even as it collected dust in the corner of her bedroom. The chair has no functional use to her now as it is missing a leg and doesn’t fit her physically, however, it does allow her to reminisce. The chair represents memories between Suzume and her late mother as shown by the film later: Upon first inspection, Suzume asks where its face is. Confused, Suzume’s mom responds saying “What? This is a chair” (1:11:39-1:11:43). To fulfill Suzume’s

birthday wish, her mom adds one final touch – the face on the backrest. Suzume is overjoyed and embraces her mom, saying she will keep it forever and ever. This memory highlights the chair’s emotional connection to Suzume which remains strong even if it no longer fits her.

Although it essentially has no functional use, the chair finds itself once again in an everyday central role in Suzume’s life. When Souta is transformed and possesses the chair, the chair is granted another life – one that is supernatural and transcends both its original purposes of functionality and keepsakes. Its anthropomorphic appearance combined with its broken, well-loved history as a child’s toy makes it a unique intermediate between humans and mementos. Although it is now essential to Suzume’s daily life, it still seems misplaced. Its childish appearance easily stands out among the adult-sized chairs at the bar Suzume works at and the wide benches of the trains Suzume takes across Japan. This disparity illustrates how much Suzume has changed and grown since receiving the chair, yet the chair continues to serve her, filling part of the hole her mother left behind. Similarly, Souta’s inhabitation of the chair reminds the audience of its new, more useful purpose to Suzume. The quiet thunk of Souta falling forward after falling asleep depicts the chair coming in and out of its inanimate state each night. The chair’s lifelessness highlights its failure to function for its original purpose, however, while Souta is consciously controlling the chair, it has the capacity to support Suzume in both her adventures and emotional struggles. Suzume’s emotional connection with the chair through both her mother and Souta, reveal that the chair’s existence in Suzume’s adult life is not completely futile as it proves an inanimate object can be more than just functional.

The word “queer” itself has undergone a similar process of development away from its original meaning, morphing from an adjective denoting strangeness, to a slur for homosexuality, to a spectrum for sexual and gender identity, to a categorical box for deviant individuals. The

evolutions of both *Suzume*'s chair and the word "queer" challenge the restrictions sexual and gender identity hold on the concept of "queerness." Cathy Cohen, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, pushes the boundaries of queerness beyond sexuality and gender in her essay *Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens*. Drawing from the intersection between queer politics, heteronormativity, and institutional racism, sexism, and classism, Cohen restructures the meaning of queerness. She argues that queerness is constructed by "subjects thereby defined as deviant and 'other'" (Cohen, 439). By this understanding, deviancy is the common denominator for queerness. Cohen uses this argument to highlight that the word "queer" has also been used to exclude heteronormative individuals, dividing "everything gay" and heteronormativity.

Queerness does not require one's sexual or gender identity to be radically different from the cisheteronormative standard and instead focuses on the rejection of assimilation and oppression of deviancy. While the three-legged chair in *Suzume* does question sexuality and gender roles in romantic relationships, its deviancy as an inanimate object also contributes to its queerness. By deviating from its original purpose as a functional chair to support *Suzume* emotionally (through both her mother and Souta), the chair parallels queerness without mention of gender or sexuality. Cohen's encouragement to include deviant heteronormative individuals in queerness further supports the chair's purpose being beyond entertainment as an emblem of queerness.

***Suzume* as a Reflection of Real Life**

Suzume is no exception to Shinkai's outstanding ability to "[render] the mundanities of contemporary life" (Burt, 3). Although he is typically acknowledged for his use of "real locations and props to craft the vivid details of his anime worlds" (3), *Suzume*'s mirror of Japan is more than surface-level beauty. By indirectly presenting queerness through Souta's physical form of a chair, Shinkai underscores the constraining social dynamics of queer presentation in Japan. As a

subject to these social codes, *Suzume*'s (and many Animes') solution to meeting their creative needs has been assimilation. By presenting queer relationships in a more “digestible” manner, producers can ensure a successful profit for their films while allowing their creatives limited artistic freedom. Still, the stress caused from regulating their art underscores the struggle for queer expression in Japan.

The tensions, challenges, and emotions felt from these art forms accurately mimic that of real life. *Queer Voices from Japan*, a compilation of first-person narratives from the queer community in Japan, features Ochiya Kumiko's testimony as a queer activist – one of the many experiences *Suzume* represents. As a part of her activist work, Kumiko released numerous informational pamphlets, one of which she used the catchphrase “unhappy about not being able to say how happy you are” (McLelland, 209). This particular pamphlet covered her study meeting in the Hyōgo Prefecture chapter of Seikyōkyō, the Council for Education and Study on Human Sexuality, in which she addressed how Japan's society “compels women to love men” (209). As someone who identifies as a lesbian, Kumiko testified that lesbians “carry wounds and deal with oppression in this society, where heterosexuality is compulsory” (210). Kumiko documented how a compulsory heterosexual society inflicts trauma on queer individuals who are unable to express both the joys and pains they experience associated with their queer identities. Kumiko highlights what Professor Doi-Benson warned of: the dangers and consequences of silencing of queerness.

As Kumiko continued her work, she made steps towards vocalizing queer experiences, particularly in the workplace. A second flyer she made reflected this work and focused on how “although [she] wanted to live in a way that's ‘true to myself’ (*jibun rashiku*), [she has been] suffering because of the pervasiveness of the notion—generally taken for granted—that men and

women like each other” (211). From this frustration, Kumiko decided to take a huge risk by coming out and promoting a society which aligns with the proclaimed acceptance of non-normative sexualities. Her actions paid off as she later won the election for the chair of an educational research committee. However, the reality is that Kumiko was not met with complete support. Her boss made a “stern expression” (209) towards her for the next several days – evidence that not all people are immediately accepting of these movements or change.

Kumiko’s boss is an example of Kumiko’s actions going farther than she intended. Even though Kumiko was not starting a rally, she was still perceived as a threat to those above her and the hierarchical structure she exists in. Similarly, Shinakai’s choice in making Souta a chair did not address queerness directly but still sparked controversy and larger discussions such as this. *Suzume* is not a perfect representation of the complexities and challenges Kumiko faced as a queer-identifying person in Japan, however, its discreet approach to handling queerness speaks volumes about the difficulties of expressing queerness in both the entertainment industry and individual lives.

Conclusion

Japan still has a long way to go for the liberation and the destigmatization of queerness, however, its progress is not at a standstill. Art and entertainment like *Suzume* have begun to normalize and create opportunities for more public conversations about queerness online. Additionally, more physical spaces are being created to support the queer community. For example Nijiro Kazoku, or Rainbow Family, was established to help LGBTQIA+ families “navigate legal restrictions and social stigma” (Lee, 1). Nuanced discussions of queerness both online and offline have highlighted the growing support towards the queer community in Japan. It is now a matter of a greater unified movement to make tangible change. For example, Japan is

the only G7 country that has not legalized same-sex marriage in the 21st century even though they maintain an overall approval rate of 71% in the Japanese population (91% in 18-29 year olds) (1). From this it is clear that socially, queerness in Japan remains largely present but has not formally progressed much.

Masked discussions and unique representations of queerness such as *Suzume* have become an outlet for the queer community in Japan during a time of need. Although *Suzume* is not exactly a protest or self-censorship, it has become the subtle emergence of a voice advocating for queer liberation. By using Souta's form as a chair to present queerness indirectly on a large-scale international platform, *Suzume* mirrors the lack of social expression and freedom for the queer community. Through its nuanced storytelling and symbolic representation, *Suzume* ultimately critiques the constraints placed on queer expression in Japanese society, highlighting the delicate balance between visibility and survival. By embedding themes of assimilation and resilience within its characters, the film not only amplifies the struggles faced by the queer community but also gestures toward the enduring hope for greater acceptance and liberation.

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