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## Sacred Time in the Work of Makoto Shinkai

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Honors Thesis

SACRED TIME IN THE WORK OF MAKOTO SHINKAI

by  
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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment  
of graduation requirements for University Honors

Comparative Arts & Letters Department  
Brigham Young University  
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## ABSTRACT

### SACRED TIME IN THE WORK OF MAKOTO SHINKAI

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Comparative Arts & Letters Department

Bachelor of Arts

This thesis looks at two works of anime director, writer, and producer Makoto Shinkai and examines how they create sacred experiences through the visual and narratological construction of time. Mircea Elaide's concept of eternal return is joined with Gilles Deleuze's film theory of Time-Images and time crystals to analyze the creation of sacred moments: moments of rejuvenation and reorientation. Not only are the two films, *5 Centimeters per Second* and *Your Name*, read through the lens of these theories but these movies also illustrate how anime is unique art form that is well suited for the manipulation of time and the demonstration of sacred experiences.

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## **I. Introduction**

Film made a splash when it entered the world because it went a step further than photography. It captured time in motion in a way no other medium had ever done before and from this art form eventually came another—animation. Building from a foundation of cinematic elements, animation took new liberties with what it created, building worlds and narratives that were not constrained by what could be found and/or replicated in the material world but instead allowing, for visual and temporal representations of something beyond the everyday to be played out. In a way, animation became something sacred. As described in the book *The Sacred Quest: An Invitation to the Study of Religion*, the word “sacred” “refers to something separated or set apart from other things” (28). Animation, though often similar to what one sees, is never actually the exact same and therefore will always be removed from the material world our eyes take in everyday. However because of the distinct nature of the medium, animation is one of the deftest ways at cultivating and showing the sacred, particularly due to its ability to manipulate the manifestation of time. In particular the works of anime director Makoto Shinkai, which often present time as a challenge between two characters in love, illustrate how in both content and form animation can skillfully and broadly construct sacred experiences in innovative ways that develop sacred studies in cinema.

In cinematic religious studies, which is synonymous with sacred studies, it typically focuses on reading and analyzing religious symbolism in non-animated, often Western features. This leaves a large gap in scholarship to be filled in evaluating animation—particularly the Japanese style of animation commonly referred to as anime (Thomas)—as well as more secular, or non-religious, portrayals of the sacred. However

there is ample material to dive into that would address this hole in the greater discussion. Specifically when you examine the work of anime director, producer, and writer Makoto Shinkai through the lens of the sacred it shows that anime is one of the best mediums for displaying the sacred, moving past an organized religious form of it, by showing how romantic relationships and their connection to time can create life-changing moments for the individuals that shape how they function in their normal lives.

In Shinkai's work the mutual expression of love between characters becomes a sacred time because it is set apart from the everyday, which makes sense when paired with outlines of the sacred defined by Mircea Eliade, religious historian and theorist. In Eliade's book, *The Sacred and the Profane*, he defines the profane as the everyday, ordinary aspects of life. The profane is not evil or inherently flawed but it can create the feeling of being out at sea with no direction and no anchor. To contrast the profane there is the sacred, an experience either spatially or temporally framed that transcends the individual and the mundane realities of everyday life and connects people to the divine, which then allows them to feel oriented and rejuvenated as they continue in their everyday tasks.

The dichotomy between the sacred and the profane can be cinematically shown in a plethora of ways. The sacred can be depicted in an ordinary way or spectacular way, or a film can choose to show the profane aspects of life as something mundane or special. Whatever direction the filmmakers decide to take they accomplish their vision primarily using the visual presentation and navigation of space or how they edit and lay out the film in terms of time. Conventional filmmaking is bound to the constraints of what can

actually be created and captured in terms of mise-en-scène and cinematography, however animation is not.

Though animation can range from hand drawn 2D animation to computer generated 3D animation and can come from various places in the world, the focus of this paper resides in the animation style commonly referred to as “anime,” which simply means Japanese style animation, which has its roots in Japanese manga, a type of visual story similar to comics (Buljan and Cusack). In the *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Film*, Jolyon Baraka Thomas’s chapter “Religion in Japanese Film: Focus on Anime,” he explains how anime uses many of the characteristics of actual filmmaking such as the shift in a frame from a mid-shot perspective to an extreme close up to accentuate the character’s feelings. He then goes on to talk about how anime’s drawn format makes it a prime medium for showing the sacred experience.

Illustrated images depict, but they also imagine and exaggerate. Manga and anime provide the illusion of juxtaposed static images as images in motion, making these media particularly appropriate for representing magic, miracles, apotheosis, enlightenment, or any other number of events or experiences related to religion. They also lend themselves to religious reception, since art and religion share a willingness to interpret illustrated images as reality (Gimello 2004). (Thomas 204-205. Citation in original.)

He addresses how the liminal nature of anime, incorporating elements from both visual art and cinema, allows it to be more generously interpreted through a religious or sacred lens.



Within the work of writer, director, and producer Makoto Shinkai formation and presentation of sacredness can easily be found. The plots and the characters in his films are always framed in the context of a larger world often featuring the fast paced rhythms of modern life that are prevalent for many Japanese people. Shinkai creates a profane view of the world amidst subway rails, school, and day jobs that many of his characters find themselves swimming—and sometimes even drowning—in. In his films sacred time is constructed and demonstrated through the romantic relationships or events experienced by the characters.

Love is an emotion that is often deeply interwoven with time. For example, though one may harbor feelings of love for another for a long period the climactic mutual expression and reception of that deep emotion itself is rare and fleeting. A moment like that can never last—even though the relationship itself could continue on—so whenever it is experienced in Shinkai’s films it is something sacred for the participants and potentially even for the audience. Moments of romantic confession and reciprocation act as anchors amidst the storms of everyday life. In the hustle and bustle of modern Japanese life a shared moment of love, though fleeting, acts as an orientating and invigorating moment for Shinkai’s characters that defines or significantly shifts their personal existence.

Before diving into the specific examples of love and time in Shinkai’s work, it is useful to lay out the most significant approaches that help us understand time and how it connects to the sacred. According to Mircea Eliade, there are two major categories of time. There is profane time, which is the ordinary experience of time that people naturally feel in their day-to-day lives. This can also be called linear time. Then there is sacred

time, which Eliade summarizes as a cyclical view of time focusing on “eternal return” (68) that can be experienced through hierophany or ritual. If it’s the latter it usually involves some sort of symbolic death and rebirth. In his theory, he explains how experiencing sacred time means returning to “a primordial mythical time made present” (68), usually the moment when gods created the world, because it temporarily allows a person to “becom[e] contemporary with the Gods” (91), giving that individual a sense of divine connection or rejuvenation when they return to their profane lives. Continually tying back to the “primordial mythical time” (68) is the concept of eternal return.

This is not the only way of looking at how time can be experienced and particularly apt for this paper are Henri Bergson’s philosophies, with special attention to his definition and implications of the present found in his book *Time and Free Will*. Bergson breaks down time into two main categories: the virtual and the real. The present is the current material moment being experienced and is considered to be “real”. Everything else, whether it be past or future, is the “virtual”. Bergson does not view time linearly, as moments that supersede each other in successive duration with the past being as concrete as the present. Instead he sees time as a morphing thing that is constantly interacting with itself. Another way of describing his definition of time is viewing the virtual as currents that exist in a vast ocean, flowing in various directions, with a person swimming around inside of it. The figure swimming represents the present moment. They may only be aware of the current water they are surrounded by but based on their position they can also exist where multiple currents swirl together thus creating a unique space for the swimmer.

In fact the present is such a unique space for Bergson that it holds the same potential for experiencing the sacred just as the beginning of the world does in Eliade's descriptions. Expanding on Bergson's theory, Eric L. Berlatsky explains how,

the present moment bears the burden of the entirety of the past, [but] it is also the one moment that is not purely part of the past, not strictly a part of the consciousness, but is also part of the world of matter, on the order of the real, and is therefore the one moment when true freedom is possible, the freedom to move beyond our own history, our repeated social plots, and to instead create and experience something new. (61–62)

Bergson's theory is similar to Eliade's because the past is involved in experiencing the present, but the present itself is new and liberating so it allows the individual to be oriented/rejuvenated. In Shinkai's films both theories combined to create the sacred in the instances when the characters meet in the present and are able to communicate or do what they've been longing to. When they have that information whole-heartedly received or even shared those times become anchor points because multiple pasts and futures weigh down on them while simultaneously freeing them and allowing them to alter and orient their lives (Lawlor; Bergson).

Building off of Bergson's theory, Gilles Deleuze connects his notions of the virtual and the real with the cinematic art form and introduces the concept of the time crystal and the Time-Image. Deleuze acknowledges that time flows and intermingles like different currents in the ocean allowing for the past and/or future to be experienced in conjunction with the present or in other terms, for the virtual (past and future) to be felt simultaneously with the actual (the present). He explains how "pure actual existence,

then, whilst it is unrolled in time, duplicates itself along with a virtual existence, a mirror-image. Every moment of our life presents the two aspects, it is actual and virtual, perception on the one side and recollection on the other.” (79) As these “mirror-images”, or unreal reflections of the actual are being created in conjunction with the present they start forming what Deleuze calls a time crystal which has a specific structure involving a kind of circuit between each other until they reach a point where they become indistinguishable. Once this crystal is completed those within it have a capacity to shift and frame the virtual. This kind of moment can be shown in film in a shot or a series of shots where the distinction between virtual and actual is either very permeable or basically non-existent. When an awareness and actualization between the mirror-image/reflection and “real unfolding” occur this creates an opportunity for choices to be made that could dramatically shift the narrative. In general fully formed time crystals are rare and though they may start to build multiple times it is easy for that structure to be break apart before its fruition.

A Time-Image on the other hand is a single shot where the “pure flow” of time is captured (Colebrook). This is usually a shot that doesn’t necessarily relate to the narrative, serving no role in explaining or affecting situations, and it is not a time lapse. According to Deleuze, Time-Images are used to capture not only distillations of time but also moments of “pure becoming”, which is a time of liberation that occurs in the present/actual/real. Though Deleuze’s joining of Bergson’s theories to cinema aren’t explicitly about the sacred they lend themselves towards that interpretation because time crystals and Time-Images are unique moments that give way towards transcendence, orientation, and rejuvenation.

The tying together of Deleuze's cinematic theory that builds on Bergson's philosophies of time and then coupling that with Eliade's approach to the sacred addresses a gap in scholarship that Gregory Watkins identifies in his chapter of *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* entitled "Religion, Film and Film Theory". He states,

The vast majority of work on film and religion has made very little use of significant works in film theory proper. This is largely because work on film and religion has 1) tended to focus on what has come to be known as the theological approach, or 2) sees film as an important vehicle for cultural values broadly construed, and therefore of interest to theorists of religion generally... Rather, it is precisely that film is often too readily made the object of that particular theoretical or theological point of view without careful consideration of the distinctive nature of the medium." (82)

Time crystals and Time-Images are film theory that focus on characteristics of film—and animation—that explore the sacred beyond normal religious conventions because those shots can turn the profane into sacred moments because they are visual images that expand beyond the space presented. This paper also acknowledges that the exaggerated quality of anime as a medium is an essential part to sacred studies that is deeply interwoven with its presentation of it.

To illustrate those points the rest of this paper will be looking at two of Makoto Shinkai's works: *5 Centimeters Per Second: A Chain of Stories about Their Distance* and *Your Name*, which are two films that create the sacred in profane ways through the romantic interactions of the characters. Each film constructs the sacred through time

crystals and Time-Images while still incorporating Eliade's concept of eternal return. The first film was one of Shinkai's earlier works while the latter is his most recent film showing that the theme of the sacred can be read into his body of works early on and is still present today. In addition to that *Your Name* is particularly worthy of examination because it is one of the highest grossing anime films to date. Study of this popular film in connection to sacred studies may invite further analysis of the sacred into anime both in content and as a medium.

## **II. 5 Centimeters Per Second**

"You know...I've heard it's 5 centimeters per second." "Huh? What is?" "The speed at which cherry blossom petals fall," begins Shinkai's three segmented film, *5 Centimeters per Second: A Chain of Stories about Their Distance*. It follows Takaki Tōno's experiences with love in his different life stages and how distance plays a role in all of it. Though physical separation is a large part of the issue, this film also demonstrates how being separate in time can be a struggle as well. Time crystals frame the challenge of the temporal, fleeting situation of love as they form and fracture in various parts of the movie. In general, this film shows how anime can construct sacred time by joining Mircea Eliade's concept of eternal return with Deleuze's time crystals to make an unreligious moment, a defining time in someone's life.

The first segment is entitled *Cherry Blossom* and begins with several close up shots in the city of Tokyo before visually introducing the characters. There is a puddle reflecting trees, electric boxes through a fence, a moped, and a car parked against a barrier. These shots are used to establish a sense of time rather than space, because even

though they might capture familiar objects they are shown in close ups at uncommon angles so rapidly that the audience doesn't have enough of an opportunity to establish themselves in those specified visual spaces. Instead the viewer strings the shots together following the connecting auditory thread of the aforementioned dialogue and the visual thread of the falling cherry blossom petals that are present in each shot. The fluttering petals amidst these insert like frames are both in and out of focus, simultaneously plentiful and singular and so like drops of water it immerses the audience into a flow of time as if it were an actual river, drawing them in so that they can more fully experience the formation and breaking of time's crystalline structure.

*5 Centimeters per Second* is focused on the fracturing of that structure and foreshadows continual rupturing in the first scene. After those insert shots the main characters, a boy and a girl, are introduced. The boy is Takaki and the girl is Akari and their lack of uniforms shows that they're still in primary school although old enough to be walking around the city alone together. Akari mentions the speed at which the blossoms fall after which she exclaims that the descending petals look like snow—an element that will become important later on in the film—and then breaks off into a run down the road she and Takaki are walking on. He runs after her. She crosses some railway tracks just as the barriers come down, before Takaki can catch up to her, leaving him on the opposite side of the track. Before the train comes between them Akari yells to her friend that she hopes they can watch the cherry blossoms fall together the following year. A train then rushes between them.

Takaki and Akari, as they watch the blossoms fall together, are in one specific time flow and a special one at that since they clearly want to return to it, echoing Eliade's

notion of sacred time and how it involves returning to the moment the world began. This scene is arguably the beginning of the world for these children because they are on the precipice of so much change. Watching the cherry blossoms fall together becomes a type of ritual for them reflecting the characters liminal state of being in a time of symbolic death and rebirth. The blossoms themselves are dying and falling apart in order to make way for new life in the form of leaves and actual fruit, just as Takaki and Akari are finishing their time in primary school and are about to emerge into more formative years. Shinkai heightens the magical aspect of this moment by the coloring, using vibrant and soft pinks that don't normally pervade a landscape, let alone a cityscape, in order to romanticize the situation even further. However this is not a full crystal that has formed because even though the virtual hope and dream of having this in their future is spoken a train jets between them before the virtual and actual can really connect, breaking down the flow of time that the characters and the audience have just been immersed in.

The next scene occurs months after watching the cherry blossoms together. Akari has moved away and therefore she and Takaki are attending different junior high schools. Several fragmented shots of Takaki going about his daily life are shown while Akari's voice recites letters she writes to him, making it clear that there is a physical distance between the two character that wasn't there before. However it's also a distance in time because their personal experiences are happening separately which is emphasized by the disconnect between the audio and the visual elements of the film since one does not hear Takaki vocalize the letters he writes in response nor do you see scenes of Akari's life even though her voice is present. There is no unification between the audio and the visual elements, and the shots displayed are not long enough to create a sense of security or



streamline continuity for either the characters or the audience, until a bird is shown flying.

The viewer can watch and connect with the bird as it flies out of Tokyo and through the sky sweeping towards the heavens, weaving through the clouds, and passing over a twinkling river until it finally flies over Akari. As the bird flies the audience hears Akari talk about her excitement over the meeting she and Takaki are planning, which would mark a year since they last saw each other. The time crystal starts to build during that scene because the audience finally gets to see Akari, plus a bird flies over a sparkling river appearing to hint that the characters are soon to re-enter the same flow of time that will lead them to something sacred. To further foreshadow a sacred moment, Akari's voiceover notifies both Takaki and the viewers that there is a cherry blossom tree in her town and that the two of them may be able to watch the blossoms fall—if they form in time—just like she had wished for the previous year. From this point on, the time crystal starts to form.

It builds when the narrative's perspective switches from Akari to Takaki on the day they are supposed to have their meeting. He gets on a series of trains—a flow of time in its own right—and starts to reminisce about the time he and Akari spent together as children. He talks about how he felt like they were kindred spirits, having so much in common with one another while being so very different from the rest of their classmates. He remembers the phone call when she called to tell him she was moving that broke both their hopes of attending the same middle school. All of these virtual moments start to swirl around him like the people milling and transferring trains on the platform in his

actual and present state of being. And in the larger scope of the world, it starts to snow and slow down the trains.

Takaki acknowledges that he had never before considered the possibility that the train might be late and starts to grow very anxious. This scene and recognition that there are things beyond his own control relates to Deleuze's commentary on Henri Bergson's notion of time as something larger than life:

Bergsonism has often been reduced to the following idea: duration is subjective, and constitutes our internal life. And it is true that Bergson had to express himself in this way, at least at the outset. But, increasingly he came to say something quite different: the only subjectivity is time, non-chronological time grasped in its foundation, and it is we who are internal to time, not the other way around. That we are in time looks like a commonplace, yet it is the highest paradox. Time is not the interior in us, but just the opposite, the interiority in which we are, in which we move, live and change. (82)

Takaki has known that Akari is geographically separated from him but only now is he gaining awareness that they exist separately in time, which is additionally symbolized through the falling snow that is causing all the delays. He remarks how everyone's shoes in the station are covered with snow. This visual image is symbolic of how everyone moves within time individually, each existing in a separate flow. Yet as Deleuze points out, time may be subjective but in reality we are all interior to time and at this moment in Shinkai's film that point is made by Time-Images which include shots of snow falling outside the train, or outside a train window that frames Takaki. He begins to be aware

that he is both in his own time separate from everyone else while also being connected to a larger scope of time that is beyond him.

As Takaki realizes that he is actually “interior to time” he starts to recognize the crystalline structure of a circuit between the virtual and the actual. Within anime it might be said that the whole feature is too virtual to create a time crystal—a structure that involves looping or blending between the “real” and “virtual”—because it is drawn and therefore somehow removed from the actual. Yet to say that anime is incapable of portraying the actual is a limited approach. It is true that anime is very virtual, maybe even more so than film, because it allows for great freedoms in terms of its construction both visually and in terms of the narrative. There need not be a limit on the fantasy, romanticism, or unfamiliarity that is shown. Though the audience may not view what’s on screen as “real”, this doesn’t take away from the “actuality” of the film subjects’ experience within the world that the anime has created. As the audience witnesses Takaki fret on the train they are peering into his actuality, a moment growing with pressure of the virtual that pushes down on him.

Though it was previously stated that the virtual includes the past and the future it should also be noted that connected to the virtual are hopes, dreams, wishes, and even memory. Deleuze mentions other types of images: “recollection-images, dream-images and world-images” (68) that illustrate how the virtual is charged with more than a simple position in a sea of time. It’s affected by a lot of emotions, symbols, and context. And in this part of the film as the actual is being felt more acutely by Takaki thanks to his anxiety and hunger. The virtual also begins to push down on the situation more. He remembers how he was unable to comfort Akari the night she called him to tell her that

she was moving, the words of the very first letter she wrote him at the beginning of middle school, as well as how for the last two weeks he'd been working on a letter to give her that contained everything he wanted to say—a letter full of the virtual. This pressure allows for the crystal to keep moving towards completion.

The images that flash across the screen next include an increase of flurried snow amidst rectangular bars, signs, and telephone poles illustrating the visual structure of the crystal while connecting it to time as Takaki perseveres towards his destination. At one point he's shown standing against a concrete column where a gust of wind ruffles his coat so much that the letter he wrote for Akari is torn loose and lost. Takaki is obviously upset and continues to be disheartened as the final train ends up standing still in the snow for an additional two hours but all of these hardships are climaxing to when he finally arrives at Akari's station.

When he finally steps into the glow of the station he sees Akari waiting for him. Relief washes over both of them as they exchange conversation over a bento meal Akari has prepared for them to share. Though this meeting is exciting and full of warmth, the mutual expression of love and the completion of the time crystal occur right after this. As the station closes the two teenagers step out into the night. The audience again is shown a flurry of time images threaded together by the still falling snow, a visual representation of being immersed in time, as they head towards the cherry tree Akari has mentioned in her previous letters to Takaki.

When they arrive at the tree the time crystal is formed. Visually this is accomplished by beginning a shot at the top of the branches of the tree, tilting down the trunk, and then lingering on the two characters standing across from each other at the

base of it. The imagery of the multiple branches fusing into one column that then seems to connect Akari and Takaki is a symbolic way of drawing all of the virtual flows together and joining them in this one moment. Akari goes on to mention that the falling flakes resemble snow while the background suddenly shifts to show the cherry tree in full bloom raining down pink petals. The virtual and the actual become indistinguishable, which is followed by the characters kissing each other. The screen fades to black for a brief moment and Takaki vocalizes that in that moment he understands where their souls, hearts, and eternity all lay out and that somehow through their kiss they had managed to share his entire life experience between them. For Takaki this moment is unlike anything he's ever felt before.

This situation is a complete time crystal but it also acts as a type of eternal return because it reminds both the characters and the audience of the beginning of the world, which is also the first scene of the film. It's distinct from all the other scenes of their daily lives that we have witnessed. This kiss under the cherry tree is so transformative for Takaki that it goes on to define and affect the rest of his life.

After the kiss is over the screen fills again with shots of snow falling over the surrounding landscape, resituating the characters inside of time, as Takaki continues his narration. He mentions that right after their kiss he's filled with immense sadness because he knows that he and Akari won't ever be together forever. His words acknowledge there will probably be a constant physical distance between them. However his statement also highlights how the moments they share together will never last. In essence, Takaki realizes that even if a time crystal comes to fruition it will always eventually deteriorate. He and Akari will always be distant in time and to visually confirm his words a bird cuts

across the screen, tearing apart the time crystal that had just formed, as it weaves through a marvelous night sky that then oscillates to show the city below as Takaki identifies how the “uncertainty of time” hangs over them.

The two characters spend the rest of the night talking to each other in a shed by the cherry tree. In the morning Takaki catches the first train back to the city. On the ride back Takaki says that he knew after that kiss his whole life would be different, solidifying that moment as something sacred because it totally reoriented his life and with that the first part of the *5 Centimeters per Second* concludes.

The second segment of the film is called *Cosmonaut* and focuses on Takaki in his new home a few years after the cherry tree kiss. This section is primarily about his interaction with a girl named Sumida at a point in their high school lives where they must decide what to do with the rest of their futures. *Cosmonaut* switches between perspectives, similar to the point of view shifts between Takaki and Akari in the first part. Through this the audience learns of Sumida’s unrequited love for Takaki while he keeps imagining something far beyond where he is. This part of the film builds a time crystal between the two of them that crumbles before completion.

There are aspects of each character that foretell that the time crystal won’t fully form. Sumida is an avid surfer, however for the last few months she hasn’t been able to properly ride a wave, continually falling instead. It’s unsure what is throwing her off but it becomes clear to the audience that she won’t tell Takaki how she feels about him until she can successfully catch a wave. Her relationship with surfing foreshadows the crystal that starts to form between her and Takaki, because it’s something she constantly works at yet it comes crashing down anyway. In a similar vein Takaki’s chosen sport is archery.

This illuminates his personal struggle because he is trying to pinpoint a certain spot, both in time and place that is far off. The distant place Takaki longs for is shown at the start of this section of the film. It's a dream where he and Akari are sitting in a field gazing into the sky of a marvelous universe that is similar yet noticeably different from the one shown in the rest of the movie. He doesn't tell anyone about his dream, choosing to shoot for this virtual moment alone as he goes through the motions of his daily life.

*Cosmonaut* covers the summer season shifting into fall, showing Takaki and Sumida staying longer to practice their respective sports after school. Even though she finishes before him, Sumida purposefully waits until Takaki is done with his archery before getting her moped and causing their paths to overlap when they are about to head home. When this happens Takaki offers that they ride home together. Sumida eagerly agrees to the offer. During their journey home several shots intersect their driving, many of which include some kind of line across the screen that prevents a sense of visual wholeness, such as the skyline intersected vertically by the light of the setting sun or the horizontal interruption of telephone wires. These shots act similar to Deleuze's Time-Images because they show a flow of time however instead of being a moment of "pure becoming" it becomes an image of diluted becoming. At this time in their lives Takaki and Sumida are filled with so much potential however these shots imply that in some way their "becoming" process is breaking down or incomplete.

The unfinished potential could refer to their individual development in society as they decide what to do after high school is over. The film shows that Sumida has left a school assignment about those very choices completely blank and is called into an office to speak with her teacher about it. She has no idea what she wants her future to be and so

to shake off the pressure she goes surfing but just like all the other times she continually crashes. At the end of that day she decides to go home alone but spots Takaki's moped by a field along the way. She goes and sits with him and together they address how they are both filled with worry and uncertainty as to what will happen in their futures—let alone the next day. Takaki's own doubts about his future ease Sumida so much that she makes a paper plane out of her assignment that she left blank and sends it off into the air where it is swallowed by the sky above. This scene again reinforces that even though time may seem like a subjective experience the characters are interior to time just like the paper airplane that gets swallowed by the atmosphere.

These moments could make it seem like the time crystal and the characters process of becoming is tied to their careers, yet the crystal comes out stronger when read in conjunction with their romantic potential. Watching the cherry blossoms fall with Akari and then kissing her underneath the cherry tree in the falling snow are sacred times for Takaki and if the film was to push Takaki and Sumida together into another sacred moment it would follow similar elements of those two scenarios but nothing seems to mirror those situations. After all, once they are done talking in the field they see a spacecraft being transported. This structure is supposed to be launched to the outer reaches of the solar system. While watching the craft Takaki muses to himself about traveling through the abyss of space all alone. As he wonders this, the visuals shift to his dream world where he's with Akari asking how far they can go. These shots illustrate how Takaki's thoughts are far from Sumida and are reaching towards something deep into the virtual rather than focusing on the actual before him.



The film then cuts to a new scene showing Sumida at the beach prepping her surfboard before entering the water. While she's buffing her board her older sister, who is also a teacher at her school, asks her if she has any idea what she's going to do with her future. Sumida replies that she's going to take it one day at a time, which is another way of saying she will choose to focus on the actual rather than the virtual, and on that same day successfully manages to ride a wave for the first time in six months. Because of her accomplishment, she decides that today is the day she'll confess her feelings to Takaki.

The following scene is when the virtual pressure and therefore the structure of a time crystal really starts to build. Like other days Sumida catches Takaki just as he's about to leave the school so they start their journey home together, stopping at the same convenience store they do every other time to purchase a drink. When they are leaving the store Sumida tries to confess how she feels but she doesn't finish her delivery and Takaki isn't able to piece the situation together so they go to start their mopeds, however, Sumida's won't start. Takaki suggests they walk the rest of the way.

The additional time Sumida now has with Takaki allows the virtual pressure to grow even more than it had before. She realizes that she has another chance to try and tell him how she feels and her emotions start to build. The tension at this moment is clear for the audience, but Takaki doesn't seem to be aware of the situation, which impedes the crystal from forming despite all of the virtual pressures. In addition to his lack of being present in the actual, the power lines cut through the scene, visually interrupting the crystal's structure from reaching fruition, even though Sumida's emotions have climaxed into tears. When Takaki finally notices her tears there seems to be a slight chance that the

confession might occur but then in the background the spaceship they saw earlier takes off.

The ship shoots upwards towards the sky rupturing the frame in two thus shattering the crystal right open. The shots change multiple times after that showing the ship burst through different places demolishing whatever parts of the time crystal that had managed to form. Takaki and Sumida, who has stopped crying, are left standing looking at the residual cloud trail cutting the sky into pieces. They continue their journey home and Sumida realizes Takaki will not accept or reciprocate her emotions. She admits she'll always love him but that he's looking at something way beyond her, which shows how the time crystal can't form unless both parties are focused on the actual rather than the virtual. Recognizing that she can't say anything to Takaki to complete the crystal by herself they go their separate ways after they reach her house. She cries herself to sleep that night and the second segment ends.

The third part of *5 Centimeters per Second* builds one more crystal that allows Takaki to return to the promise at the beginning of the film in order to reorient his life once again. This final segment begins by showing Tokyo in the springtime. Takaki is now a young man working away at computer in his home. The cherry blossoms are falling outside his window and when one petal lands on his table he leaves his work and decides to go for a walk. While he is out in the city he crosses some train tracks at the same time a young woman is crossing in the opposite direction. Takaki comments that he has a feeling that if he looks back at the woman, she would look back as well. He decides to follow his intuition and turns around catching the woman in the start of her pivot. Before they can fully look at each other a train aggressively flies between them.

A new scene opens up to show Takaki getting off of the subway during the winter. Noticing that the line for a car service is growing increasingly long he decides to leave the station and walks into the snow. On his way home he gets a call from a woman shown in an apartment but he does not answer. Instead he just looks up to the sky where more snow is falling.

After that the film shows a different station where a young woman is talking to her parents. It's Akari and the audience learns that she's going to get married in a month. She boards a train back to the city and starts thinking about a boy she used to know, which is Takaki, because of a letter she found in her room while clearing out and packing things up.

The movie then returns to Takaki's perspective and the audience learns about the way profane things in his life have played out over the last couple years. They learn that the woman whose call he rejected has been his girlfriend for the last three years but he says that nothing could bring their hearts closer even by one centimeter. He then explains that during the last few years his life has piled up with sad things although all he has wanted is to move forward. He doesn't know if what he's reaching towards is even tangible. All that he can tell is that it's somehow beyond him. Takaki's thoughts show that he is yearning for a sacred experience, something to reorient and anchor his life and to demonstrate that desire even more he starts talking about a dream he had the night before. A dream about his cherry blossom kiss when he was thirteen.

Akari's voice then joins in and together—while still being apart—they tell the story of the time they were thirteen. They finish telling the story by saying that they had promised to watch the cherry blossoms together again someday, outlining the parameters

of a sacred experience for the characters in the film. The shot then cuts to the title and subtitle of the film, *5 Centimeters per Second: A Chain of Short Stories about Their Distance*, as a song about always looking for someone starts to play. As the song progresses, scenes from the past of all three of the main characters—Takaki, Akari, and Sumida—are shown and they eventually culminate in the scene that starts the third segment.

The audience now knows that it's Akari who's crossing the tracks at the same time Takaki is, echoing the first time they watched the blossoms fall together on opposite ends of the railway when they were children. They look back at each other but when the trains finally subside only Takaki is left looking across the rails. He then decides to turn around and keep moving forward. He has once again experienced a sacred time crystal and this time it has freed him from the weight of his mundane life. The previous scenes and even the movie up until this point are acting as the virtual pressure needed to form that unique moment as Takaki returns to the time his "world" began. Deleuze explains how this particular crystal has liberated Takaki when he writes

Hence the importance of the question: where does life begin? Time in the crystal is differentiated into two movements, but one of them takes charge of the future and freedom, provided that it leaves the crystal. Then the real will be created; at the same time as it escapes the eternal referral back of the actual and the virtual, the present and the past. (88)

Takaki's choice to engage in the actual moment of turning around and acknowledging Akari's presence as the cherry blossoms scatter around them and then to move forward

with his walk shows that the time flow that dominates the scene is one of freedom, reorientation and rejuvenation.

Takaki's sacred experiences involve being present in the actual moment while also returning to the beginning of his world, which is the first time he fell in love. As the film follows him in his different life stages it shows how the virtual aspects of his life build towards recreating that moment of romantic promise he felt with Akari when they first watched the cherry blossoms fall as children. Even though not every time crystal comes to fruition, when it does it vastly redefines Takaki's life, making that event something sacred even though it's not traditionally associated with a religion. 5

*Centimeters per Second* is about the distance between characters and though there is a lot of physical separation, this film also demonstrates the separation that can exist in time or focus and how when everything aligns and comes together to create a moment—although fleeting—that orients and energizes an individual therefore becoming something sacred.

### **III. *Your Name***

“They converge and take shape. They twist, tangle, sometimes unravel, then connect again. Musubi—knotting. That's time” narrates one of the main characters in *Your Name*, an animated film by Makoto Shinkai, which illustrates the story of Mitsuha and Taki, two Japanese teenagers who swap bodies without control. As the plot moves forward, they become more entangled in each other's lives and begin to deal with the threat of an incoming comet to Mitsuha's village. Time plays an important role in this movie as the narrative becomes increasingly non-linear, fluctuating between multiple

pasts, futures, and presents mimicking the nature of braided cords that are often featured in the film as the symbol for time.

Particularly special are the few scenes when the characters and their oscillating timelines converge, or “knot,” and result in sacred moments. According to Mircea Eliade, sacred time is an instance where an individual is reconnected, rejuvenated, and ultimately reoriented because of a transcendent experience. His theory relies heavily on the concept of eternal return, and though *Your Name* acknowledges the greater notion of sacred time, it develops those moments through the theories of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, cinematically portraying how the “present” is a moment of convergence when liberation or “pure becoming” occurs, rather than a mere moment of return. In addition to furthering the discussion on sacred time by using an alternative interpretation of it, Shinkai’s film opens up the conversation of the portrayal of the sacred within anime—which is typically tied to non-dualism, nature, and films produced by Studio Ghibli (Kraemer). *Your Name* uses Mitsuha and Taki’s lives as threads that “twist, tangle, sometimes unravel, then connect again” through an animated style, adding insight and variety to the scholarship of cinema and the sacred.

Both time crystals and Time-Images are used in *Your Name* to present sacred moments, using Eliade’s notion of sacred time when one of the characters clearly engages in a symbolic ritual that allows him to connect with a “primordial mythical time,” however, that scene of eternal return isn’t the main format of sacred time that’s portrayed in *Your Name*. That momentary return opens up an opportunity for the characters to be connected again and ultimately unified in a present moment, which is a time crystal and also the climactic experience of sacred time in the narrative. Though the characters

experience Eliade's notion of sacred time, it's not the summation of their sacred moments; more important are their moments of convergence, or "knotting," but before analyzing those scenes a greater plot overview will be provided.

Mitsuha is a high school girl who lives in the countryside with her grandmother and younger sister at a Shinto temple, wondering what life is like in Tokyo. Taki, the other main character, doesn't have to wonder about big city life because he resides in Tokyo where he attends high school, works at a restaurant and spends time with his friends. On an uneventful day, Taki and Mitsuha wake up in each other's bodies. They stumble through the day in the other person's life, thinking it's some sort of strange dream but when Mitsuha and Taki return to their proper bodies they learn of actions they do not remember performing the day before—actions which were very out of character for them. Then the body swap randomly occurs again. And again. Realizing this may be a constant occurrence, they start leaving notes for each other to help the other person navigate their life without causing too much chaos and though they only communicate through journal entries they start to develop romantic feelings for one another.

Just as their feelings are really starting to blossom the body swapping stops. Due to this abrupt ending, Taki decides to go and find Mitsuha, even though he is forgetting more and more about her every day. He travels with his friends one day to the town where she lives, only to discover that Mitsuha had died three years ago due to a comet that crashed into part of her town. With this discovery Taki is driven to reconnect with Mitsuha so that he can warn her about the impending danger. This spurs a series of events that allow the main characters to consciously unite for the first time and change the course of their pasts/futures.

One of the first events that occur in that series is a very Eliadic moment, in terms of sacred time. Taki, determined to contact Mitsuha through whatever means necessary, is inspired by the woven cord he wears on his wrist, to visit a tree where he had previously been to—in her body—with her grandmother and her sister in order to make an offering to the gods. While they bring that offering to the tree, her grandmother explains the importance and concept of “musubi”. She says:

Musubi is the old way of calling the local guardian god. This word has profound meaning. Tying thread is Musubi. Connecting people is Musubi. The flow of time is Musubi. These are all the god's power. So the braided cords that we make are the god's art and represent the flow of time itself.

With that description in mind Taki makes his way to the tree—the place of the gods. And in order to get to this sacred place he experiences a symbolic death, which he himself vocalizes when he enters the tree’s surrounding moat when he says, “From here is the underworld” (59:10), after which he enters the inside of the tree. The interior space of the tree acts as a womb, facilitating Taki’s rebirth once he drinks the offering that was left—special sake Mitsuha had made during a Shinto ritual. Upon consuming the sake he is thrown into a current of time that carries him back to a sort of “primordial mythical time” (Eliade 68), which is the creation of Mitsuha and her world.

Though this scene predominantly uses Eliade’s theory of eternal return, it does not act as the culmination of sacred time in *Your Name*; rather it presents a time crystal that begins the build towards the ultimate moment of freedom and “pure becoming” for the film’s main characters. This particular time crystal is represented by a sequence of hyper-stylized scenes that are sewn together by the umbilical-like cord Taki wears on his



wrist, depicting the twisting of certain pasts and futures. This sequence abruptly ends when liminal Taki is about to witness Mitsuha's death by the oncoming comet. The screen cuts to black and after a gong is hit, all other sound is cut off and the audience sits in silence and darkness for a few seconds. When the screen lights up again, Taki has managed to swap bodies with Mitsuha one more time, demonstrating how the time crystal that had just preceded this moment was not the end of a reorienting experience but rather a new beginning for the characters to start slipping into each other bodies again, deal with the immanent impact of the comet, and work towards a unification.

As the film plays on it's revealed to the audience that the characters have actually met each other once before. On the day before the comet hits the earth, Mitsuha sporadically decides to go to Tokyo and meet Taki. She spends most of her day wandering around the city hoping to find him in one of the spots she visits but she doesn't see him and every time she tries calling him the system tells her that it's not a valid phone number. She is unsuccessful in her searches and by the evening she is simply sitting at a subway stop. She is exhausted and losing hope but before she gives up her hunt and goes home, a train pulls into the station with Taki inside. Mitsuha hops into the car he's standing in and as the train starts speeding away to its next stop she makes her way toward him through the throng of people. When she addresses him, he looks really confused and when she asks him if he remembers her, he says nothing, making it clear that he has never met nor seen her before. Mitsuha is too embarrassed to make anything of the situation so she decides to get off at the next stop. As she is exiting the train, Taki calls out to her and asks her what her name is. She responds not only by telling him her name but also by tossing him a braided cord that she always wears in her hair. As she

tosses him the cord all of the profane surroundings fade to white, accentuating the reorienting effect this will have on each of the characters as the braid metaphorically ties them together and foreshadows their reunion at the edge of the crater that surrounds the sacred tree.

Taki and Mitsuha's first meeting is cinematically presented as a flashback, making it a virtual moment, yet it serves the purpose of building the narrative towards its climax, the moment when the main characters meet in the material actual. The protagonists have both made it to the ridge of the crater that surrounds the tree, even though they are inside of each other's bodies, and are calling out to the other person. They can hear each other's cries but they are unable to see each other—until it's *kataware-doki*, or twilight. This metaphoric time when the day and the night are interwoven serves as the backdrop for the knotting of pasts and futures in the reality of the present moment.

When Mitsuha and Taki physically meet they are experiencing a sacred moment according to Bergson and Deleuze's theories because they are framed in a time crystal where they are liberated from the virtual. The virtual that the characters are liberated from in *Your Name* is the situation where the comet kills Mitsuha and destroys her entire village. In this present moment they can acknowledge the comet, yet make unspoken plans and decisions to reorient their futures. While the characters stand together in this liminal moment they discuss some personal matters, one of them being the braid that Mitsuha gave Taki on the metro in Tokyo. He tells her that he has kept it for three years and that he wants her to have it now. She accepts his offer and ties the cord around her head, once again allowing this braid to symbolize their personal "musubi" or "knotting,"

further emphasizing the sanctity of this moment because they are becoming more unified with each other, transcending themselves as well as their tangled pasts/futures.

*Your Name* and *5 Centimeters per Second* are not the only films by Makoto Shinkai that utilize a discrepancy in time and the “knotting” of time flows to accentuate a sense of sacred, or transcendent time—though they are the most prominent—and in his discussion of *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*, Gavin Walker explains how the future is altered through intersecting time flows when he says:

...future outcomes are not grasped by examining a field of possibilities across linear, chronological time and computing their likelihood. Instead, *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*, tells us that the “future” is predicted, or more accurately, identified, by seeing in these “parallel worlds” the *results of an actual future*. In other words, the ability to grasp the past, or indeed the ability to understand the future, occurs through the conceptual overlapping of another disjunct temporality on the present—to a certain extent in *The Place Promised in Our Early Days*, there is no time other than the present, a type of “eternal now” that is stretched, elongated, and retracted through its imbrication with other parallel presents, an endless oscillation from one present to another and back.

(*emphasis in original* 11)

Though Walker focuses on a different Shinkai film, and argues that that entirety of that particular film is depicting a “present” throughout its course, his observation and analysis of how Shinkai depicts the present as a sort of “eternal now” is relevant to the field of cinema and the sacred and this interpretation of *Your Name*. Walker appears to echo Bergson and Deleuze by describing the present in Shinkai’s work as a key moment,

because it is the only moment, through which virtual moments are connected, reinterpreted and ultimately rewritten.

The phrase “eternal now” that Walker uses may seem similar to Eliade’s notion of eternal return and “becoming contemporary with the Gods,” (Eliade 91) but for the “eternal now” to line up with that theory the participants of the sacred moment would need to remember. For Eliade, the distinction between the sacred man and the profane man is that the former chooses to acknowledge and remember the gods and the cosmos whereas the latter does not, usually out of his own prerogative. However, remembering is not a choice that the main characters get to sustain in *Your Name*. For them, their sacred moment along with their consciousness of what happened during that time unravels quickly after they leave each other’s presence. Both characters are committed to remembering each other—they even tried writing their names on each other in the twilight, but were cut off before being able to finish. They cannot return to that moment either though. Mitsuha is propelled forward to save everyone from the oncoming comet while Taki wakes up from that experience the next day, clueless to why he’s on the ridge of a crater. For Eliade, eternal return helps an individual remember, but the climax in *Your Name* illustrates how the dissipation of time and memory doesn’t strip away sacredness. Forgetting may actually preserve the sanctity of the “actual” moment that has become “virtual”, by carrying it over as the foundation of another converging and sacred present.

That idea weaves right into the ending scene of the film, creating one more sacred moment for the characters and the audience before the movie closes out. The “end” begins 5 years after the comet has hit Mitsuha’s village. Taki is looking for a job as an

architect in Tokyo and though he is focused on interviewing and getting hired he is simultaneously haunted by a search for something deeper, something he can't quite pinpoint, but has to do with that city the meteorite destroyed. The audience is of course fully aware that the missing piece in Taki's life is Mitsuha, so whenever a braid woven into some woman's hair momentarily catches his attention, the audience is hopeful that the characters will be reconnected in that moment. But several of those opportunities pass by with no results. Harkening back to Mitsuha's struggle of looking for Taki, the characters finally see each other through the window of passing metro trains and as their eyes lock they instantly become aware that they have found not only what, but who they have been searching for. They get off their trains and a montage of their frantic search for each other begins, leading towards a sacred present.

The sanctity of Mitsuha and Taki's reunion is created more for the audience than it is for the protagonists. For example, the characters themselves are not engaging in a time crystal quite as much as the audience is as the viewer's knowledge of the past converges with their hopes and predictions for the future. The people watching this movie are looking for a moment where they get to see Taki and Mitsuha together on screen at the same as they sit in their seats. They want to be twisted into these lovers' tale in order to help reorient their story as a happy one. Not only do the viewer's personal desires push them towards that present, but also cinematic techniques are employed in order to create a sacred moment for both the characters and the audience.

One of the main techniques is the use of Time-Images. These are images that Deleuze describes as shots that typically break free of any linear narrative purpose, instead capturing a distillation of pure time. While the montage of Mitsuha and Taki

running around the city plays out, there are several Time-Images that interrupt that flow. These shots do not heighten the tension of the protagonist's reunion—taking the images out would build the suspense to the same level as when those shots are included. They're not establishing shots, nor do they convey any information like an insert shot would. Ultimately they don't serve any narrative purpose. With all that in mind these shots that consist of street signs, an inconsequential and partial cityscape, a mailbox, a parked taxi, and a dandelion make sense as Time-Images because they portray the flow of time outside of the character's narrative, and serve as witnesses of a "pure time" that will converge in and sanctify the "present" ending for Mitsuha, Taki, and the audience.

At the end of the movie the main characters finally find each other on opposite ends of a stairwell. Taki goes up as Mitsuha goes down, and as they silently pass each other by the audience worries that this was a moment when the "musubi" was unraveling instead of tying them together, missing out on the "actualization" of the virtual. However, Taki redirects the orientation of the scene by asking Mitsuha if they had previously met. His question is followed by a shot of the cord in her hair, which symbolically knots them together one more time as she responds that she had the same thought. As both characters look at each other with tears in their eyes, they simultaneously ask for each other's names as the camera tilts up toward the sky. This ending shot stamps a sacred moment for the lovers and the audience as they experience a present moment that through the camera, carries them to the cosmos, liberating them to redirect their lives as they see fit.

In summary, in *Your Name*, scenes where the protagonist's storylines knot together create sacred moments. Sacred time in this film is more contingent upon the intersection of the virtual in a material present that liberates the characters from the pasts

and futures that weigh upon them in that same moment than simply returning to a “primordial mythic time.” (Eliade 68) Taki’s experience at the tree serves as a gateway rather than an anchor of such a transcendent time because it assists the characters in swapping bodies again. Also supporting the climax is the memory of Mitsuha and Taki’s first meeting because it helps construct the time crystal they experience during twilight on the edge of the crater. That scene in conjunction with the virtual moment of Mitsuha’s death hang over the protagonist’s heads but in their “eternal now” they are free and able to rewrite what happens to Mitsuha’s village and the people that live there when the comet hits. Another time crystal is also created, this time for the audience, at the end of the movie with the assistance of Time-Images that unify the viewer and the characters of the story in a present moment that allows for a reinterpretation of the entire narrative along with the audience’s experience of it.

Altogether *Your Name* may be read as expanding upon Mircea Eliade’s theory of sacred time, incorporating Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze’s interpretations, along with opening up the conversation of the portrayal of the sacred within anime. Shinkai’s film does include non-dualism and places nature in a special position, but not as dominantly as you typically see in other popular anime films such as Studio Ghibli productions. In *Your Name*, he does not limit himself to the spatial exploration of transcendence. Instead, time is intricately woven in this movie, like the braids depicted in the film, and when various threads connect and “knot” they cinematically create sacred moments: moments of reconnection, rejuvenation, and reorientation.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In summary, this paper has explored two works of Makoto Shinkai in order to demonstrate how capable anime is at portraying the sacred in conjunction with Deleuze's and Eliade's theories on time. Shinkai's work often focuses on the romantic interaction between the main characters of his films and how time creates an issue between them. The characters cannot stay in their special moments forever, even if their relationship continues. The most defining times they spend together are fleeting. It's these orienting moments when characters can say or do things with one another that anchor and energize their lives that become something sacred even though they may not have a connection to traditional religious symbolism.

*5 Centimeters per Second: A Chain of Stories about Their Distance* creates sacred moments for the principle character, Takaki Tōno, by building time crystals in a way that allows him to return to a time when the world began. The first part of the film shows how watching the cherry blossoms fall with a girl named Akari is the start of a new world for Takaki because it's his first meaningful experience with love, an experience that is sealed with a kiss in a time crystal. The second part of the film shows Takaki in high school at a point in his life when he's not focused on his present circumstances so when an opportunity for love arises and a time crystal starts to form the situation and the crystal break apart instead. The final section of the film shows how Takaki's profane life has burdened him while he has tried to grab at something beyond him. However, in the final moments of the film he's able to achieve another formed time crystal as he lives out his promise with Akari to watch the cherry blossoms together even though they are no longer



connected like they were before. Watching those blossoms fall together, though simple, fleeting, and unreligious is a sacred moment for Takaki because it reorients his life.

Moments of rejuvenation, reconnection and reorientation similarly become sacred in Shinkai's other film *Your Name*. As characters Mitsuha and Taki uncontrollably swap bodies they fall in love while also dealing with the threat of an oncoming comet to Mitsuha's village. The characters individual story lines are actually three years apart, but as they connect to each other in time crystals, moments where different aspects of the virtual converge—whether that be time flows or hopes and dreams—they create a unique opportunity to alter their futures as well as their understanding of the past and therefore construct sacred moments.

Reading these two films through the lens of Eliade's and Deleuze's theories of time shows how anime, especially the works of Makoto Shinkai, can create sacred moments both in content and in form. Anime's opulent quality pushes past visual limitations that can arise in other forms of art to create an experience that is even more distinct and "set apart"—to hearken back to an earlier definition of sacred—than film itself. Analyzing both *5 Centimeters per Second: A Chain of Stories about Their Distance* and *Your Name* in relation to these theories broadens the scholarship on both anime and studies of the sacred in film and hopefully invites others to explore the possibilities in both these fields more.

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