

## *Weathering with You: Mythical Time and the Paradox of the Anthropocene*

### Introduction

WITH MELTING GLACIERS, RISING SEA levels that erode coastlines, increasingly hot summers that bring wildfires, heat waves, and droughts, and unpredictable yet frequent extreme weather from hurricanes to tornadoes, the planetary effects of global warming and climate change are observable everywhere. Our experience of this planetary change in this accelerated phase of the Anthropocene, however, is almost always site-specific; it is mediated through local meteorological and ecological conditions. Weather is often our experiential interface with the otherwise planetary effects of the climate crisis.

There has been a plethora of documentary and fictional films on issues related to the planetary scale of climate crisis, including the breathtakingly composed documentary, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (dir. Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, Edward Burtynsky, 2018). Films such as *Own- ing the Weather* (dir. Robert Greene, 2009) and *Geostorm* (dir. Dean Devlin, 2017) have similarly addressed the controversial topic of geoengineering and its precursor, weather modification, in the context of the climate crisis. Instead of focusing on these familiar filmic examples, however, this essay focuses on the animated film *Weathering with You* (dir. Shinkai Makoto, 2019) in order to think critically about the limits and merits of site-specific, local approaches to the Anthropocene. Unlike the globetrotting trajectory of *Anthropocene*, *Weathering with You* addresses the issue of

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**ABSTRACT** This article focuses on the animated Japanese film *Weathering with You* (2019) in order to think critically about the limits and merits of site-specific, local approaches to the anthropogenic climate crisis, and to the Anthropocene and its mythopoetic tendency. While the geological period of the Anthropocene is thoroughly historical and rooted in the modern scientific paradigm of Earth history, the mythologizing tendency in search of new cosmologies within the discourse of the Anthropocene complicates this linear trajectory of time. Anthropocene discourse invites its critics to revive and reinvent local myths. When these myths appear within the planetary scale of Anthropocene discourse, they take on a cosmological, if not universal, outlook. It is this spatial and temporal paradox of myths within the geological framework of the Anthropocene that this article investigates through the mediation of *Weathering with You*. REPRESENTATIONS 157. © 2022 The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 68–89. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2022.157.4.68>.

anthropogenic climate change through the mediation of mythical temporality, which precedes and resists the geohistorical temporality that undergirds the very concept of the Anthropocene.

Set almost entirely in the city of Tokyo (except for a few moments when the diegesis shifts to a small remote island off the Pacific coast of the Kantō region and when the film pans to long shots of Earth’s curvature seen from the edge of outer space), *Weathering with You* insists on the nexus between increasingly erratic “strange weather” and urban legends about a mythical “weather maiden” who manipulates the weather. In spite of its site-specificity—and in part because of it—the film, I argue, allows us to think through a set of epistemic challenges posed by the universalizing Eurocentric tendency of Anthropocene discourse. In particular, I highlight what I see as the new configuration in this discourse between the history of Earth (or geohistory) and mythology.

The geological time of the planet and the mythical time of gods and spirits belong to two different registers of knowledge. Paradoxically, however, Anthropocene discourse appears to revive mythology, or at least invites critics to revive and reinvent a set of myths. And myths are both site-specific and local, even if they aspire to the universal. Put differently, each local set of myths offers a distinct cosmological framework for explaining the universe. Like the weather that we experience site-specifically, myths tend to be localized. However, when they appear within the planetary scale of Anthropocene discourse, they take on a cosmological, if not universal, outlook. It is this spatial and temporal paradox of myths within the geological framework of the Anthropocene that I want to investigate in this article.

To begin with, the Anthropocene is a concept already steeped in temporal paradox. It blurs the categorical distinction between human history and geohistory—two fields that were seen as completely separate until recently. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes: “Geological time and the chronology of human histories remained unrelated. This distance between the two calendars, as we have seen, is what climate scientists now claim has collapsed.”<sup>1</sup> Amid this categorical crisis pertaining to our conception of history, a second paradox emerges: the reappearance of myths from within the discourse around the Anthropocene.

This second paradox deserves attention not because myths and science are categorically separate but because of the types of myths that return unchecked in the discourse of the Anthropocene. These myths are canonical as well as newly invented. My interest in turning to *Weathering with You* is motivated by this curious folding of mythical time within the geological time of Earth, even though these two temporalities are often considered distinct. The goal of this essay is thus to think through the historical and local specificities of the myths mobilized by participants in Anthropocene

discourse in the hopes of unsettling this geological concept of the Anthropocene. Most often, these myths are Greek, as in the case of the mythological figure of Gaia, but not always. In the case of *Weathering with You*, the film resurrects a mythology of the dragon god—prevalent in Japan, China, Korea, and other parts of Asia—and invents a legend of the weather maiden, who channels the dragon’s magical power to control meteorological phenomena.<sup>2</sup> This invented legend or myth is further couched in the language of online rumors, urban legends, and conspiracy theories. The film’s repertoire of digital and analog lore is vast, including the occult magazine *Mu*’s report on the American military’s secret project of geoengineering. The film, in short, tries to mythologize anthropogenic climate change while reflexively pointing to the status of myths as human constructions.

Set in the near future, when the planetary effects of climate change become palpable in the localized form of extreme weather, the animated film *Weathering with You* is a climate fiction with a twist. It addresses the issue of anthropogenic climate change, but it does so through the mediation of mythical tropes—a dragon god and Gaia—alongside online rumors of a “weather maiden” (*tenki no miko*), a contemporary incarnation of the pre-modern village shaman. The entire city of Tokyo is covered by a heavy canopy of rainclouds. With the simple gesture of hitting a “purchase” icon on their smartphone, a customer can buy a patch of sunny weather made to order—a temporary respite from an otherwise perpetual state of cold summer rain. The seller is an entrepreneurial teenage girl named Hina, a spiritual medium who channels the mythological force of the dragon god to modify the weather with the help of Hodaka, a runaway teenager from one of the Izu islands.<sup>3</sup> After passing through the gate of a dilapidated Shintō shrine on top of an abandoned office building, Hina turns into the legendary weather maiden and is given the supernatural power to summon the sun at will.

Hina sells her power to deliver sunny weather, but each time she uses her power she slowly loses her physical human form, becoming translucent and buoyant. Hodaka finally breaks Hina out of this fated death (or disappearance) at the expense of Tokyo forever being under rain clouds and slowly submerged under water. Hina’s life is thus saved in exchange for the permanent climate change that affects the city and its inhabitants. A few years pass. Toward the end of the film we see a close-up of a brochure for the Faculty of Agriculture at the Tokyo University of Agriculture and Technology, which Hodaka attends. The headline on the brochure reads “Anthropocene: Education for the New Geological Generation.” Presumably, Hodaka will work on strategies for climate change adaption in the agricultural sector, and Hina will no longer try to reverse extreme weather. The plot is an allegory of giving up the dream of controlling adverse effects of planetary climate change that manifest as local weather.

The easiest way to read the film's engagement with mythology is to read it in the culturally essentialist framework of Japanese animation's affinity with animism and Shintō spirituality. Such a culturally essentialist reading of Japanese animations has been cultivated by fans and critics of Miyazaki Hayao—from *Princess Mononoke* (1997) to *Spirited Away* (2001). Shinkai Makoto, the director of *Weathering with You*, clearly shows his fondness for the quasi-nationalist take on Shintō rituals in his previous film, *Your Name* (*Kimi no na wa*, 2016), which invites this type of analysis.<sup>4</sup>

Historically, animation has been more amenable than live-action cinema to fantastic worldsettings and characters that draw heavily on myth, legend, and folklore. It is also associated with the technical wonder of bringing life to otherwise inanimate objects. Animism, broadly understood as the attribution of a soul or life to inanimate entities, may thus appear as a logical framework of analysis given its conceptual association with animation. The affinity between the technical art of animation and animism is mostly etymological (anchored in the Latin word *anima*, meaning “life” or “soul”), yet this affinity has been central to theories of animation and its medium specificity. The most well known in this regard is the work of Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and his analysis of Walt Disney's animation in terms of the vital, shape-shifting, “plasmatic” quality of animated images.<sup>5</sup> More recently, scholars such as Teri Silvio and Thomas Lamarre have explored the epistemological and ontological affinities between animation and animism by situating their analyses in dialogue with religious anthropology and its turn to “new animism.”<sup>6</sup>

However, I want to take a different route. Instead of reading *Weathering with You*'s incorporation of mythical elements through the lens of animism and Shintō spirituality, in what follows I read its deliberate mixing of the mythical act of weather-making and the scientific fact of the climate crisis in the present through the paradox of the Anthropocene that I identified above. To do so, I also turn to the German media theory of “cultural techniques” to analyze Hina's transformation into the weather maiden or weather-maker. My aim for taking this route is twofold: first, to bring forth what I see as the paradoxical status of mythology within the geohistorical framework of the Anthropocene; second, to read the mythical figure of the weather maiden as one that attempts to restore both cosmological and meteorological order to the world, where this order has been unsettled by the concept of the Anthropocene and planetary climate change. More specifically, I borrow Bernhard Siegert's definition of cultural techniques-as-media as making and unmaking a set of distinctions at the symbolic and material registers in my reading of the shrine gate through which Hina becomes the weather maiden. In spite of Siegert's poststructuralist penchant for seeing the process of making and unmaking binary distinctions

as the basis of culture, his reading of various types of techniques—and not just technical objects—as media offers a methodological opening for thinking about myths of weather-making from the perspective of media studies.

John Durham Peters, for his part, suggests that the weather is a form of celestial media, closely associated with timekeeping technologies but also charged with the symbolism of carrying messages from the gods. Peters, like Siegert, provides useful avenues for thinking about weather as media in organizational (calendars and clocks) and symbolic (weather as messages from the gods) forms. Both of these aspects are at play in the film *Weathering with You*, from the calendars and apps that mark Hina’s weather-making gigs, to the ceiling paintings in a temple that narrate the lore of the dragon god, to the scenes on the top of the cumulonimbus clouds to which she is summoned. However, what I want to foreground is how the film’s incorporation of mythical time and weather-making stages the limits of drawing and undrawing symbolic and epistemic distinctions in the face of anthropogenic climate change. The problem of distinction, I argue, is at the heart of the paradox of the Anthropocene itself, and the film grapples with this paradox through the mediation of local myths.

### Geohistory and Mythology

The concept of the Anthropocene as a new geological epoch is premised on the idea that the human (*anthrōpos*) as a biological species has become a geological force that has significantly altered and continues to shape the geophysical composition of Earth. Humans as a biological species have existed for quite a short time in comparison to the deep time of geology. Yet their activities have significantly impacted Earth, from the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere to the radioactive materials sedimented in soil and glaciers over just a few centuries. “Humans have become geological agents very recently in human history,” writes Chakrabarty. “In that sense, we can say that it is only very recently that the distinction between human and natural histories—much of which had been preserved even in environmental histories that saw the two entities in interaction—has begun to collapse.”<sup>7</sup> Much Anthropocene debate focuses on this collapse of categorical distinctions.

First popularized by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen in his critique of human-induced climate change and other environmental impacts on Earth systems in 2000, Anthropocene discourse has been enthusiastically discussed by, and stirred competing responses from, scholars in the natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Marxist scholars such as Jason Moore and others have contested the universalizing undertone of the

concept, claiming that it flattens the historical impact of capitalism, which grew out of the industrialization process and was buttressed by European colonialism and the imperial extraction of natural and human resources.<sup>8</sup>

Others such as Chakrabarty and Bruno Latour have drawn our attention to the epistemological crisis brought on by the Anthropocene, which challenges the categorical distinctions between the deep time of geology and the historic time of human civilizations, between geohistory and world history, and between nature and culture. As Chakrabarty writes, “The Anthropocene requires us to think on two vastly different scales of time that Earth history and world history respectively involve.”<sup>9</sup> Humans as a biological species used to be part of natural history, distinct from the history of humans as political agents. With the discourse of the Anthropocene this distinction between biology and politics is blurred.

In addition to prompting us to rethink these categorical distinctions, Anthropocene discourse, I argue, also prompts us to think about another temporality: that of mythology. There is a curious trend among scholars and critics who engage in the Anthropocene debate: they turn to mythology as they critique the universalizing impulse of modern science, inherited from the Enlightenment, and its mechanistic view of nature. As I noted earlier, I see this trend as the secondary paradox of the Anthropocene.

Take, for instance, Latour, who resurrects the Greek myth of Gaia in his discussion of the Anthropocene through James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis’s scientific theory of Gaia.<sup>10</sup> Or take Donna Haraway, whose critique of the Anthropocene turns to the Greek myth of Medusa (which I will discuss more below). This revival of myth within the discourse of the Anthropocene follows the search for a new worldview—or cosmology—other than the one inherited from the Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup>

The epistemic challenge posed by the Anthropocene is hence not limited to the collapse of the categorical distinction between deep time of Earth and deep history of the human. Rather, this collapse extends to and contaminates the conventional distinction between science and mythology. In search of a new cosmological outlook, scholars like Latour and Haraway turn to Greek mythology. Shinkai parallels this move but turns to a mythology of the weather maiden. When we consider them side by side, we can better grasp this paradoxical return of mythology within Anthropocene discourse and its theoretical stakes.

Before turning to the film, let us consider how scholars treat myths in their discussions of the Anthropocene. For Latour, the concept of the Anthropocene offers a means for moving away from the epistemological bind of naturalism: “By giving a totally new *dimension* to the very notion of ‘human dimension,’ these historians [of nature] are proposing the most radical term of all for putting an end to anthropocentrism as well as to the

old forms of naturalism; they are thus completely reconstituting the role of human agents.”<sup>12</sup> This newly configured role of humans as geological agents for Latour demands a different worldview, a new cosmological outlook. Latour argues that it is one we desperately need if we are to escape the Enlightenment view of nature and find the nonhuman-centered view of agency needed to address the challenges posed by the current climate crisis.<sup>13</sup>

In *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime*, Latour praises and resurrects the controversial theory of Gaia. In order to explain the capaciousness of this theory, Latour first turns to its origins in a myth written by Hesiod. In defense of his exegetic attention to this Greek poet’s rendition, Latour writes: “It is this way of reconstructing bit by bit the semantic field, the rituals, the archaeological testimonies to the existence of the divine characters and concepts, without worrying about their ideal substance, that the great exegetes of the French school have been able to rescue the anthropology of ancient Greece from a sterile academism. What holds true for the ancient Gaia mythology holds still more true for the scientific Gaia.”<sup>14</sup> Even though this deliberate mixing of Gaia’s mythology and its scientific counterpart is counterintuitive, it is a calculated move for Latour. For mythology opens up the epistemic closure of modern science. The ancient myth of Gaia itself is not the worldview he seeks, but its outside status vis-à-vis science allows him to posit its scientific counterpart—Gaia theory—as the alternative worldview to that of the Enlightenment.

Similarly, in the article “Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia is So Hard to Understand,” Latour and climate scientist Timothy M. Lenton note that they have purposely chosen to retain what they call the “mythological baggage” of Gaia:

Gaia might be the name of a shift in understanding how to approach many phenomena previously lumped together in the notion of nature. This is why we are—one coming from social science and the other from natural science—joining forces to keep open the possibility that we are dealing with a change in what could be called a *worldview*, by which we mean a distribution of traits affecting science as well as politics, morality, and the arts. In brief, a cultural paradigm shift, comparable in scope to the one introduced at the time of the scientific revolution by Galileo Galilei. It is actually this shift in worldview that justifies our use of *Gaia* unapologetically in what follows—not in spite of but *because* of its mythological baggage.<sup>15</sup>

I want to underscore their point that the Anthropocene and its climate regime require a new worldview, that is to say, a new cosmology. To get to this new cosmological outlook they need all the mythological baggage that comes with the name Gaia, since this mythological figure of the personified Earth stands in opposition to the mechanistic view of Earth as a machine.<sup>16</sup>

Instead of stripping the mythological allure of Gaia from Lovelock and Margulis's scientific hypothesis of the complex Earth system that living forms collectively shape and remake, they embrace it.

Likewise, Haraway turns to the Greek myth of Medusa as she posits the alternative name *Chthulucene* to describe the new geological epoch of the Anthropocene. She writes: "The story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable return of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on super powers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again."<sup>17</sup> Inspired by the earthly spider and the Greek myth of Medusa, Haraway suggests *Chthulucene* because "we need another figure, a thousand names of something else, to erupt out of the Anthropocene into another, big enough story."<sup>18</sup> This is when she turns to the feminist trope of fierce Medusa, a snake-haired chthonic (meaning "subterranean") mythical being who is slain by the hero Perseus. Connecting the underground sedimentation of fossil fuel to subterranean and undersea creatures from spiders to corals, Haraway spins the thread of her "Earthbound" (a term she credits to Latour) narrative for the new geological epoch. She writes: "Perhaps Medusa, the only mortal Gorgon, can bring us into the holobiomes of Terrapolis and heighten our chances for dashing the twenty-first-century ships of the Heroes on a living coral reef instead of allowing them to suck the last drop of fossil flesh out of dead rock."<sup>19</sup>

Gaia and Medusa: two Greek mythological female figures enlisted by the scholars of the Anthropocene. While I understand their desire to move beyond the cosmological poverty and anthropocentrism of the Enlightenment and modern science, their gestures also nudge me to reflect on the apparent complicity between Greek mythology and the implicit Eurocentrism of the Anthropocene, even though the former is mobilized to undermine the latter. All myths are provincial, to play on Chakrabarty's well-known critique of the presumed universality of European thought.<sup>20</sup> Yet Greek mythology has been conferred a privileged status above other types of mythologies because of its pedigree, its imagined association with Europe. Scholars such as Kathleen D. Morris and Elizabeth DeLoughrey have called for "provincializing the Anthropocene" in order to critique its implicit Eurocentrism.<sup>21</sup> Morris, following Chakrabarty, argues that "provincializing the Anthropocene means not only that we no longer take European agricultural or industrial history as a starting point, or that we stop trying to project (and retrodict) proposed causal relationships between population and anthropogenic effects derived from a limited sample of human economic history, but also that we attend to the ways in which



existing ‘Western’ structures of thought and disciplinary practice overdetermine modes of agency—human and natural.”<sup>22</sup>

My proposal to read the film *Weathering with You* in light of current Anthropocene discourse aligns with these scholars’ attempts to question the assumed universality of “Western” conceptions of the human, history, and nature. That said, however, I do not wish to simply affirm the provincialism of myths. It is not my intention to read the film’s reliance on “Eastern” or “Japanese” mythologies of the dragon god and the weather maiden as cosmological alternatives to Greek mythology. To do so is to risk cultural essentialism and, worse, to erase the historicity of these local mythologies. These potential risks notwithstanding, there are two reasons it is worth foregrounding the centrality of myths in *Weathering with You*. First, the film is part of the mythopoetic tendency of Anthropocene discourse. Latour, Haraway, and Shinkai in their own ways are reaching for alternative cosmologies. Second, the film also allows us to examine how this general tendency gets provincialized or localized.

*Weathering with You* and the scholarly discourse of the Anthropocene both mythologize this new geological epoch in search of new cosmological models or worldviews other than the modern scientific one that presupposes the separation between nature and human, Earth history and human history. That is to say, precisely at the time when the planetary crisis of rising sea levels, melting glaciers, the increased frequency of extreme weather, extinction of species, and other calamities appears as a shared (though not necessarily unitary or universal) destiny for the human species on Earth, scholars and critics are finding the limitations of the modern—and Eurocentric—distinctions drawn between nature and the human. The awareness of these epistemic limitations leads them to turn toward various mythologies that allow for alternative cosmologies.

Cosmology, by definition, presupposes an order; it is always an explanatory framework that describes the order of the universe. It is no surprise, then, that the implicitly universal stakes of the current planetary climate crisis prompt critics of the Anthropocene to look for different models of the universe that can better address and mitigate this crisis. The return of mythology within Anthropocene discourse, then, is a symptom of this epistemological challenge generated by the need for new cosmological models.

While the geological period of the Anthropocene is thoroughly historical and rooted in the modern scientific paradigm of Earth history, the mythologizing tendency in search of new cosmologies within the discourse of the Anthropocene complicates this linear trajectory of time. This is why I have called this relation between geohistory and mythology the paradox of the Anthropocene, a self-contradictory proposition that undermines its own

premise. The scientific and historical premise of the geological concept begets the mythological temporality that negates it.

How, then, might we deal with this epistemic conflict within the Anthropocene, and how might we read this conflict locally through *Weathering with You*, while keeping the planetary scope of the climate crisis as it is addressed in the film?

To answer these questions, we need to address the historically specific impact that geology as a modern science had on the nineteenth-century Japanese conception of time. According to Stefan Tanaka, geology was crucial to this modern conception of the homogenous secular time of humans, which is radically separate from the mythical time of gods and spirits. The archaeological and geological research projects conducted by Euro-American scientists such as John Milne, Heinrich Edmund Naumann, and Edward Sylvester Morse, whom the Meiji government hired to promote Western scientific education in Japan, introduced an epistemic wedge between the mythical time of gods and spirits and the geological time of Earth. Like the negation of the Judeo-Christian creation myth of the Bible brought on by Darwin's theory of evolution, geology "was instrumental in demystifying this amalgamation of the human, natural, and spiritual worlds by bringing in the abstract arena of science."<sup>23</sup> It was thanks to this demystifying impact of geology, Tanaka continues, that "the historicization of society emerged from science, not from the field of knowledge we now call history."<sup>24</sup> The geological understanding of the Japanese archipelago, in other words, led to the chronological sense of the calendrical and clock time of modernity, decoupled from the mythical time of gods and spirits.

Not all of the mythical time of premodernity, however, disappeared with the introduction of geology. Instead, its imperial elements were folded into the state ideology of modern Japan. The divine lineage of the Japanese emperor, descendant of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, as described in imperially commissioned ancient chronicles of myths and legends (*Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, both from the eighth century), was preserved, while the government adopted Shintō as the state's official, "non-religious" ideological backbone.<sup>25</sup> In other words, while geology, along with other scientific knowledge (such as psychology), helped demystify and reclassify certain beliefs in folklore, myths, legends, gods, and spirits as superstition, the state institutionalized the mythology of Shintō as an imperial ideology to support Japan's modernization and colonial projects to enlighten and civilize its subjects.

It is for this reason that I refuse to apply the culturally essentialist view of Shintō as a folk religion—with "traditional" animistic mythology—to reading the Shintō motifs in *Weathering with You*. To do so would be to doubly erase the historicity of Shintō mythology, whose modern institutionalization is inseparable from the equally modern institutionalization of geology. That

is to say, the relation between geology and Shintō mythology in the case of Japan is thoroughly *modern*. They are complementary structures of knowledge that worked together in legitimizing imperial ideology and institutionalizing science. To examine the local manifestation of the mythopoetic tendency of Anthropocene discourse in *Weathering with You* means keeping this historicity of the institutionalization of geology *and* mythology in mind.

In the next section, I examine this mythopoetic tendency of the Anthropocene further by focusing on the figure of the weather maiden, the one who makes and controls weather. Weather-making, or the willful modification of the weather by human agents, is presented as a temporary—and costly—solution to climate change. In this sense, the localized scale of weather-making in the film allegorically stands in for the planetary scale of geoengineering proposed as the technological fix to the anthropogenic climate crisis. The aim here is to rethink this mythopoetic tendency within Anthropocene discourse by focusing on the tropes of weather-making and on the Shintō shrine gate, both of which operate as cultural techniques for reasserting distinctions, and thus cosmological order, in the face of the distinction-eroding concept of the Anthropocene.

### The Gate as a Cultural Technique

Tracing the romantic narrative arc of “boy-meets-girl,” which characterizes many of Shinkai’s other animations—including the time-travel and body-swap narrative of star-crossed lovers set against the cosmic event of a fallen comet in *Your Name*—the film *Weathering with You* likewise sets its romantic couple against the planetary backdrop of the climate crisis. As I noted earlier, the geological concept of the Anthropocene is directly referenced in the university brochure that Hodaka reads. The planetary scale of climate change, of which the extremely prolonged summer rain in Tokyo is only a localized symptom, is also frequently signaled by the aerial shots of Earth from either the mesosphere or outer space.

The aesthetic of *Weathering with You* is deeply atmospheric and climatic. It makes the viewer feel the sensations of raindrops hitting the window as Hina watches in silence as her mother dies in a hospital bed; the softness of fluffy snowflakes that fall at night, obscuring the glare of neon-lit city streets through which Hodaka, Hina, and Hina’s brother, Nagi, walk huddled together; and the humidity of storm clouds massing and passing above the ferry that Hodaka takes from the island to Tokyo harbor. With stunning views of cumulonimbus clouds in the sky through which Hina and Hodaka fly, the film’s references to Japanese folklore and myths, including dragons that control the element of water and the blue stone pendant that Hina



FIGURE 1. Hodaka and Hina falling from the sky. *Weathering with You*. Directed by Shinkai Makoto (Japan, 2019), DVD. All images are taken from this DVD.

wears, Shinkai recycles familiar tropes from and pays homage to his fellow animator Miyazaki's classics, *The Castle in the Sky* and *Spirited Away*.<sup>26</sup> Even the film's theme of controlling the weather through prayers amid escalating climate change, and its imagery of Tokyo slowly sinking underwater and being rewilded with more greenery, has much in common with Miyazaki's oeuvre, including the animated film *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, with its focus on postapocalyptic ecological destruction (fig. 1).

But unlike Miyazaki's work, *Weathering with You* uses the online and off-line subculture of the occult to frame and ground these mythological tropes. More specifically, it uses the mediation of an actually existing magazine *Mū* (for which Hodaka works) as a narrative device that filters many of these myths, rumors, and urban legends about occult phenomena.<sup>27</sup> The magazine's appearance in the film is a nod to this subcultural history of the occult, which has its share of participants among anime fans. *Mū* also smooths over the gap between the geohistorical time assumed by climate science and the film's mythopoetic gesture to fold mythical time into geohistory.

Similarly, Hodaka and Suga's journalistic research for *Mū* on the myth of the weather maiden and the online rumor of the sunshine girl brings together several narrative threads. With the intermediary role of the

magazine, the film easily shifts from a tarot-reading astrologer, who insists that contemporary sunshine girls are born out of “the will of Gaia” to reset “Gaia’s homeostasis,” to an oral tradition of a Buddhist priest, who shows a series of paintings depicting the dragon and village shamans who served as weather maidens to “cure” heaven in the premodern era. Both tales are fantastic and fictional. The film invents these myths, even though one is presented as part of the Japanese folk spiritual tradition, while the other is presented as part of New Age pseudoscience.

It is worth noting that Shintō in Japan has also become a popular object of subcultural consumption since the 2000s. Folkloric and religious tropes associated with Shintō and Buddhism—exemplified by the feng shui-inflected idea of “power spots” that have propelled nonreligious pilgrimage to remote shrines and temples in Japan—have become staple elements of Japan’s spiritual and entertainment industries for the past two decades.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the film’s use of the invented myth of the weather maiden, overlaid on the folkloric figure of the shamanistic priestess, should be read against this broad historical context in which both spirituality and the occult have become lucrative businesses.

If the occult magazine *Mū* is one type of medium that comes between the spiritual market and the occult industry, then Hina, as the contemporary incarnation of the weather maiden, is another. She is a spiritual medium who mediates between the heaven and the earth, and between the mythological time of the dragon god and the historical time of humans suffering extreme weather in the era of the Anthropocene. Her intermediary role, however, is secondary to the mediating role of the Shintō shrine gate (*torii*), which acts as the primary cultural technique of distinction-making. What turns Hina into a spiritual medium is the shrine gate that symbolically and materially separates the realm of the sacred (inside the shrine) and the realm of the profane (outside the shrine). Hina’s performance as the weather maiden is predicated upon—and made possible by—the primary medium of the gate.

To borrow Siegert’s term, the gate is a quintessential cultural technique acting as media. It is an interface that both materially and symbolically creates distinctions, at once connecting them and undoing that connection. In fact, for Siegert, cultural techniques as media generate categorical distinctions between inside and outside, nature and culture, profane and sacred, human and nonhuman, and so forth. In this regard, the interface exists prior to categorical distinctions; it precedes and generates them. For instance, without the interfacial media of the gate, window, and door, there is no distinction between the inside and outside of a house. These architectural elements work as techniques for introducing distinctions materially and symbolically. And these techniques are historically specific and



FIGURE 2. Hina walking to the rooftop shrine. *Weathering with You* (2019).

localized: “There is no such thing as *the* house, or the house as such; there are only historically contingent cultural techniques of shielding oneself and processing the distinction between inside and outside.”<sup>29</sup> Materially, the shrine gate demarcates the entrance of the shrine compound. Symbolically, it separates the sacred realm of gods from the profane realm of humans.

The shrine gate appears in the first scene of *Weathering with You*. While watching over her dying mother at her hospital bedside, Hina sees a ray of sunlight breaking through the stormy rainclouds and pouring onto the rooftop of a nearby abandoned building. She runs outside into the rain, climbs up a rusty fire escape, and finds a little green sanctuary basking in the pool of sunlight. She walks towards the shrine gate, a simple structure of two wooden pillars combined with crossbeams painted in red. The gate appears to be in the Shinmei style, though its form is rather unorthodox insofar as its top beam is made with a longer round log and the bottom beam with a shorter log (instead of having the lengths of the crossbeams aligned). With the red paint partially peeled off, the gate looks tattered and aged. Standing above the crumbling concrete floor, whose numerous cracks are covered with weeds that have lush green leaves and blossoming yellow flowers, the weathered appearance of the gate suggests the quiet passage of time. Next to the gate is an offering of an eggplant and a cucumber to welcome back ancestral spirits for the annual Buddhist custom of Obon (fig. 2).



FIGURE 3. Cumulonimbus clouds in the sky. *Weathering with You* (2019).

When Hina passes through the gate with praying hands, she flies up into the atmosphere and finds herself on top of a gigantic cumulonimbus cloud amid a patch of green grass and translucent fish. The long shot of this iconic cloud against the blue sky—customarily associated with summer thunder-showers—alludes to the mythical image of Takamagahara (*Plain of High Heaven*), the dwelling place of heavenly gods from the ancient chronicle of *Kojiki*. When she opens her eyes, she is back on the rooftop lying below the gate. The gate is also the portal through which Hodaka rescues Hina from the plain on the white cloud. When they both return to the surface of the Earth, they are lying together underneath the gate (fig. 3).

The supernatural and magical power of this gate is both transformative and transporting; it transforms Hina into the spiritual medium and transports her and Hodaka into the mythical realm of the cloud plain high up in the sky, from which they gain a quasi-god's-eye view of Earth's curvature. The mythopoetic tendency of the Anthropocene towards cosmology and myth is registered in this dual function of the gate as media in *Weathering with You*.

As noted earlier, the Anthropocene is a concept that unmakes distinctions between geohistory and human history, nature and culture, biology and politics. If this concept unmakes symbolic distinctions and collapses the epistemic boundaries between hitherto separate fields, objects, and

categories, then the shrine gate-as-media operates in an opposite manner. The shrine gate makes distinctions; it creates boundaries that separate inside and outside, the sacred and the profane, gods and humans. As a concept, the Anthropocene's operation is only symbolic and not material, while the shrine gate's operation is both symbolic and material. In *Weathering with You*, this shrine gate demarcates a line between the mythological realm of the gods and the historical realm of the human, all the while connecting them as an interface through which Hina as the weather maiden accesses both realms.

The concept of the Anthropocene (which unmakes distinctions) and the cultural technique of the gate-as-media (which makes distinctions) as it appears in *Weathering with You* are complementary. That is, the Anthropocene is the necessary condition or premise upon which the gate and the weather maiden restore cosmological order and reintroduce epistemic distinctions by way of mythology. Precisely because the film insists on holding the invented mythology of weather-making and Anthropocene discourse on climate change on the same epistemic plane, they must be read as complementary in this film; one cannot exist without the other.

To repeat: *Weathering with You* is an example of the resurgence of cosmology and mythology in response to the concept of the Anthropocene, a resurgence that threatens to unmake the epistemic and symbolic boundaries between human history and geohistory created by modern science (which also separated these two "histories" from mythical temporality). As a boundary-making cultural technique, the gate symbolically supplements the film's mobilization of invented myths about the weather maiden, which reintroduce mythical time into the otherwise secular and historical time of anthropogenic climate crisis. Beyond its narrative function of transforming Hina into the weather maiden, then, the trope of the gate anchors the film's search for a cosmological order other than one provided by climate science. We may thus read this distinction-making cultural technique of the gate in relation to the film's mythopoetic gestures. Moreover, weather-making as presented in the film operates, too, as a cultural technique that materially separates the sky (pushing away rainy clouds to create a patch of sun) and symbolically restores a mythological worldview by creating distinctions between the profane and the sacred, the sky and the earth, the weather maiden and the human, within an otherwise secular and geohistorical worldsetting in the era of the Anthropocene.

Taking this line of thinking a step further, I contend that this allegory of distinction-making and -unmaking is useful for rethinking weather and geoengineering as media in relation to mythology. As noted earlier, John Durham Peters suggests that we read weather as celestial media (or "sky media," to which astronomy and meteorology belong). In *The Marvelous*



*Clouds* Peters writes: “Humans have always vigilantly watched the sky for signs of the times, and the worry about climate change continues the historical norm of reading our fate in the atmosphere.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the symbolic interpretation of the weather as more than a material phenomenon, according to Peters, is part of mythology: “As much as the stars, the weather can seem the direct action of deities. For sailing cultures such as the ancient Greeks or Vikings, wind and good fortune were intimately related. Winds are gifts from the gods—or curses; Poseidon is always messing things up for Odysseus. The gods spoke through winds, waves, and clouds.”<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, in his book *Fixing the Sky* James Fleming traces back a genealogical lineage of geoengineering scientists to magical and religious rituals of rainmakers and other mythical narratives of weather control. Fleming posits geoengineers as descendants of rainmakers, arguing that the separation of myth from science is not clear-cut and that the current view of geoengineering contains within it fantastic elements like the earlier ritual and magical attempts to control the weather. Swiftly covering a vast range of topics from the Greek mythology of Atlas and Milton’s *Paradise Lost* to early science fictions and anthropological accounts of indigenous communities’ rainmaking rituals in North America, Fleming too argues that “myth, magic, religion, and legend are not relics of the past but constitute deep roots and living sparks of contemporary practices.”<sup>32</sup>

Like Peters, who glides with ease from the Greek myth of Poseidon, who controls aquatic and meteorological phenomena, to climate change, Fleming moves in one stride from the realm of mythical and ritual controls of the weather to the realm of scientific and (and science fictional) weather controls. Indeed, the genealogy of contemporary ideas and techniques of climate geoengineering—such as injecting sulfate aerosols into the stratosphere to mimic the volcanic clouds that block incoming solar radiation and spraying seawater into the atmosphere to increase the reflective albedo effects of clouds, in order to counter the effects of global warming—developed out of earlier experiments with controlling the weather, including cloud seeding. In the mid-twentieth century, the practice of cloud seeding (for example, spraying chemicals over clouds by airplane) developed along with the institutionalization of numerical weather prediction using digital computers. Cloud seeding was also part of American military experiments to weaponize weather. This twin development of prediction and control led to the dream of “weather made-to-order,” to quote the headline of a 1954 article published in *Collier’s* magazine. Such military weather modification projects were covertly undertaken during the Vietnam War and later banned. While the military application of weather modification halted internationally, its civilian applications continued in many parts of the world, including in Japan.<sup>33</sup>

While I concur with Fleming's proposition that contemporary scientific views on weather control and climate geoengineering can appear as fantastic and mythical as earlier ritual and pseudoscientific practices of rainmaking, I also want to insist on the historically specific Japanese context of weather-making as myth and science. For instance, the modern status of Shintō mythology, whose institutionalization in the nineteenth century is contemporaneous with that of geology in Japan, complicates this context. Similarly, as I discussed earlier, the trope of "weather made-to-order" in *Weathering with You* is doubly mediated by the digital infrastructure of the gig economy, in which site-specific weather can be ordered and delivered on-demand like pizza, on the one hand, and by the invented myth of the weather maiden, who channels the supernatural force of the dragon god, on the other. The idea of ordering custom-made weather in the film, then, is not a simple continuation of premodern rituals of weather-making. In fact, there is little historical evidence of premodern rituals of sunshine-making performed by a figure such as the weather maiden.<sup>34</sup> The myth of the weather maiden is an invention of Shinkai's film.

For these reasons, my reading of weather and weather-making parts ways with Fleming's and Peters's. What I wish to emphasize is the discontinuity between myth and science, which then gets papered over by the reinvention of myth *through* science, as in the case of the mythopoetic tendency of Anthropocene discourse. Just as this tendency needs to be critiqued, we need to heed the localized contexts of myths that are mobilized or produced to think through weather and weather-making. *Weathering with You*, with its reimagining of weather-making as both myth and business, mediated by invented folklore and online platforms, points to the site-specific interpretation of myths that get entangled with science. It is this deliberately local and provincial take on the planetary scale of the Anthropocene (and its presumption of a universalized human agent) that I want to highlight. The film participates in Anthropocene discourse and adopts the mythopoetic tendency that this discourse generates, but from the specific site of twenty-first-century Tokyo.

It is fitting, then, that the film never shows Earth seen in its entirety from space; the iconic "blue marble" shot of the entire planet is absent in this Anthropocene climate fiction. This partial view of Earth corresponds to Tokyo's extreme weather, especially its unending rain, as a local symptom of the planetary climate crisis. By extension, I suggest that the film attempts to provincialize the Anthropocene through the lens of a national specificity unique to the genre of *sekai-kei* (world style), which Shinkai's work was instrumental in popularizing. In this genre the apocalyptic crisis of Japan as a nation stands in for the entire world, against which the love story of star-crossed lovers plays out (fig. 4).<sup>35</sup>

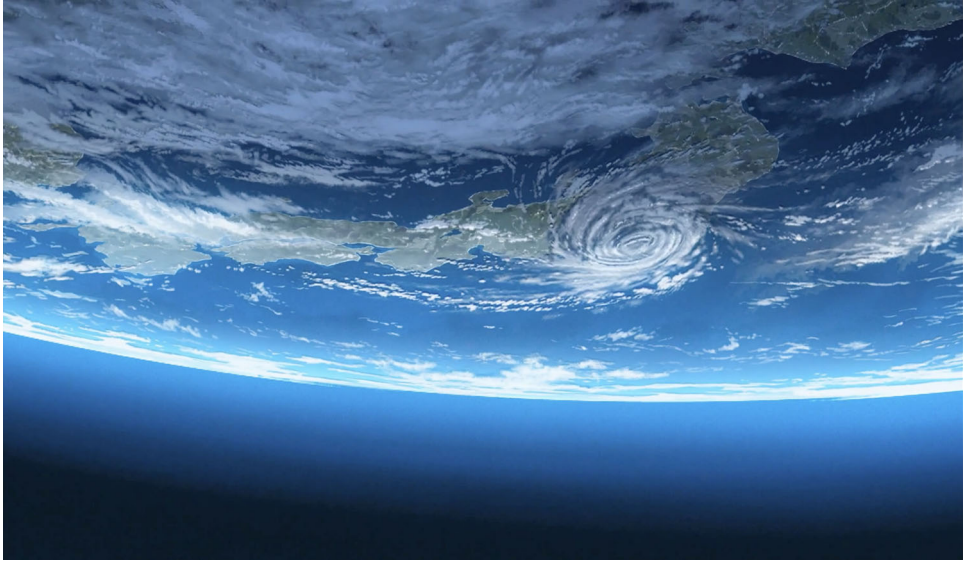


FIGURE 4. The edge of Earth's atmosphere. *Weathering with You* (2019).

At the same time, *Weathering with You's* references—mediated through mythology—to the apocalyptic condition of the climate crisis are not limited to the national context. Its deliberate mixing of Japanese and Greek mythologies, science and pseudoscience, folklore and online rumors, and so forth, can be read as an attempt to capture both the planetary and site-specific dimensions of the Anthropocene. To push this reading one step further, we might take the film as an allegory of partial or incomplete control of the weather, unlike the technophilic narrative of total control to which the contemporary myth of geoengineering aspires. Hina and Hodaka's refusal to sacrifice the weather maiden in order to reset the weather leads to the endless rain that eventually sinks most of Tokyo and makes it uninhabitable. In this regard, *Weathering with You* functions as an allegory of the contemporary practice of geoengineering as a technological fix to anthropogenic climate crisis. Both the scientific technology of geoengineering and the mythical cultural techniques of weather-making are human acts, which come with their own environmental damages and human costs. The film's narrative ultimately settles on the abandonment of such technologies and techniques of controlling the weather and climate in affirmation of the free will of humans to choose to live with the climate crisis instead of fixing it, and thus dwell in the geohistorical time of the Anthropocene instead of escaping into mythical time.<sup>36</sup>

## Conclusion

In *The Unconstructable Earth*, Frédéric Neyrat argues that Anthropocene discourse itself is a new kind of “myth” or “metanarrative” that legitimizes the instrumental and mechanical view of nature, and this discourse invites the technophilic idea that Earth can simply be reengineered through geoengineering if the climate crisis worsens.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the Anthropocene is a metanarrative, but, as I have argued in this essay, its relationship to myths is more complicated than Neyrat posits.

By reading *Weathering With You* in relation to the Japanese context of the epistemic break between myth and geology, this essay has traced what I see as the paradoxical return of myth in the mythopoetic tendency of Anthropocene discourse. This tendency, as I have argued, is visible among scholars and filmmakers who search for an alternative cosmological framework in order to reconfigure the relation between human history and Earth’s history. In order to read this mythopoetic tendency as an indicator of the epistemic conundrum posited by the discourse of the Anthropocene—which presents humans as geological agents, an idea that blurs the boundary between these two histories—I have explored the functions of local myths in relation to the planetary geohistorical concept of the Anthropocene. Just as our site-specific experiences of extreme weather become a local interface with the planetary conditions of the climate crisis, the same mythopoetic tendency to invent new cosmological orders is observable in the locally situated narrative *Weathering with You*. The local myth is an allegory of the planetary crisis, but these two scales cannot be collapsed. It is in the gap between the two that we find the paradox of the Anthropocene and its epistemic effects.

## Notes

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1. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 208.
2. See, for instance, Qiong Zhang, “From ‘Dragonology’ to Meteorology: Aristotelian Natural Philosophy and the Beginning of the Decline of the Dragon in China,” *Early Science and Medicine* 14, no. 1/3 (2009): 340–68.
3. This group of subtropical islands is located south of Tokyo and off the coast of the Izu Peninsula, although it belongs to the prefecture of Tokyo.
4. See, for instance, Katharine Buljan and Carole M. Cusack, *Anime, Religion and Spirituality: Profane and Sacred Worlds in Contemporary Japan* (Sheffield, 2015); and

- Andrea Castiglioni, "From *Your Name*. to *Shin-Gojira*: Spiritual Crisscrossing, Spatial Soteriology, and Catastrophic Identity in Contemporary Japanese Visual Culture," in *Spirits and Animism in Contemporary Japan*, ed. Fabio Rambelli (London, 2019).
5. See Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein On Disney*, ed. Jay Layda (London, 1988).
  6. Teri J. Silvio, *Puppets, Gods, and Brands: Theorizing the Age of Animation from Taiwan* (Honolulu, 2019), 37; Thomas Lamarre, "Animation and Animism," in *Animals, Animality, and Literature*, ed. Bruce Boehre, Molly Hand, and Brian Massumi (Cambridge, 2018), 286.
  7. Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History," 207.
  8. See Jason W. Moore, "Introduction" and "The Rise of Cheap Nature," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland, 2016), 1–11, 78–115.
  9. Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Anthropocene Time," *History and Theory* 57, no. 1 (2018), 6.
  10. James E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, "Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the Biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis," *Tellus* 26, no. 1/2 (1974): 2–10.
  11. Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climate Regime*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, 2017); Donna J. Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble: Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulucene," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland, 2016), 34–76.
  12. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 117; emphasis original.
  13. Bruno Latour and Timothy M. Lenton, "Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia is So Hard to Understand," *Critical Inquiry* 45, no. 3 (2019): 659–80.
  14. Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 82.
  15. Latour and Lenton, "Extending the Domain of Freedom, or Why Gaia is So Hard to Understand," 661; emphasis original.
  16. *Ibid.*, 666.
  17. Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble," 51.
  18. *Ibid.*, 55.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).
  21. Kathleen D. Morris, "Provincializing the Anthropocene: Eurocentrism in the Earth system," in *At Nature's Edge: The Global Present and Long-Term History*, eds. Gunnell Cederlöf and Mahesh Rangarajan (Oxford, 2019), 2–14; Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham, NC, 2019), 2.
  22. Morris, "Provincializing the Anthropocene," 5.
  23. Stefan Tanaka, *New Times in Modern Japan* (Princeton, 2009), 61.
  24. *Ibid.*, 60.
  25. See Jason Ānanda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago, 2012).
  26. Highlighting the "animatic" quality of Miyazaki's animations, Lamarre examines how his work produces an experience of a radically different relation to modern technology than what live-action cinema has historically offered viewers; Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis, 2009), 42.
  27. For more on Japan's occult boom and magazines such as *Mū*, see Ichiyanagi Hirota, *Kaii no hyōshō kūkan: media, okaruto, sabu karuchā* (Tokyo, 2020).
  28. See, for instance, Horie Norichika, *Poppu supirituaritii: media ka sareta shūkyō sei* (Tokyo, 2019).

29. Bernhard Siegert, *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (New York, 2015), 9.
30. John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward A Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, 2015), 244.
31. *Ibid.*, 244.
32. James Rodger Fleming, *Fixing the Sky: The Checkered History of Weather and Climate Control* (New York, 2010), 10.
33. See Yuriko Furuhata, "The Fog Medium: Visualizing and Engineering the Atmosphere," in *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium*, eds. Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe, and Francesco Casetti (Amsterdam, 2019), 187–213; and Yuriko Furuhata, *Climatic Media: Transpacific Experiments in Atmospheric Control* (Durham, NC, 2022). On the American context of weather control, see James Fleming, *Fixing the Sky*; and Kristine C. Harper, *Make It Rain: State Control of the Atmosphere in Twentieth-Century America* (Chicago, 2017).
34. On Shintō priests and village shamans, see Nakayama Tarō, *Nihon fujo shi* (Tokyo, 2012).
35. See Maejima Satoshi, *Sekai kei to wa nanika: posuto eva no otaku shi* (Tokyo, 2010).
36. Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History, and Us* (London, 2016), 40.
37. Frédéric Neyrat, *The Unconstructable Earth: An Ecology of Separation*, trans. Drew S. Burk (New York, 2019), 34.