

Writerly Analysis: The Disappearance of Haruhi Suzumia (for now, in order of spoileriness)

Anime is a medium with a curse. This is the curse: that anime is the best looking medium, so it gets away with the worst writing. Characters needn't be fleshed out, plot needn't make sense, when you can put a really dramatic castle on screen; and anime takes full advantage of this. This is the principle of It-Did-Other-Things-Right, and it is not limited to anime. Here are some other examples:

Breath of the Wild has a terrible weapon durability system, but it is still a great game. Stephen King can't write a climax to save his life, but he's still a beloved author. Shakespeare is confusing, even in his own time he was confusing, but it all works out because *the rest of the work is good*. All these escape mediocrity by virtue of IDOTR.

The Disappearance of Haruhi Suzumia also follows this. It features the titular girl, the lead male Kyon, and a magic alien robot, Nagato—I do not exaggerate. Anime visuals aside, it's a competently written movie. Over half the characters have personalities, and two scenes set up an excellent moral dilemma: is it right to restore things to the way they were before?

Let me set the scene. This paragraph summarizes the first half of the movie; if you've seen it you can skip to the next one. Kyon wakes up one day to find—you guessed it—Haruhi Suzumia has disappeared. It's as if she never existed; no one but Kyon remembers her at all. She does exist, of course, at a different school now, with different friends. Someone has altered the past year specifically so this would happen. Here's the question: Who? And should Kyon change it back?

It's Nagato. Nagato did it. Let's discuss her character. She has transformed from an anthropomorphic computer into a bookworm with a crush on Kyon. It's unclear whether this is a good change. Now Kyon has the power to change it back, but only by reverting the entire world.

Does this remind you of something? That's right: reverse apocalypse stories. Bastion or Escape from New York or Castle in the Sky. After civilization crumbles, one person can restore it if they so choose. Traditionally, either it isn't worth bringing back, or what remains in the aftermath is more beautiful than the old world ever was; and so whatever main character chooses to let the earth move on, and not dwell in the past. Our movie is the opposite. Kyon reverts it all.

I don't have much to say about the scene where he makes this choice. Suzumia is not a good person, and Kyon reflects on whether he wants to still be her friend. He decides he has fun when around her, but this isn't really to the point? This is a good looking scene with nice prose, so by IDOTR it escapes my wrath. But let's look at the actual moral dilemma; far more interesting than what this movie does.

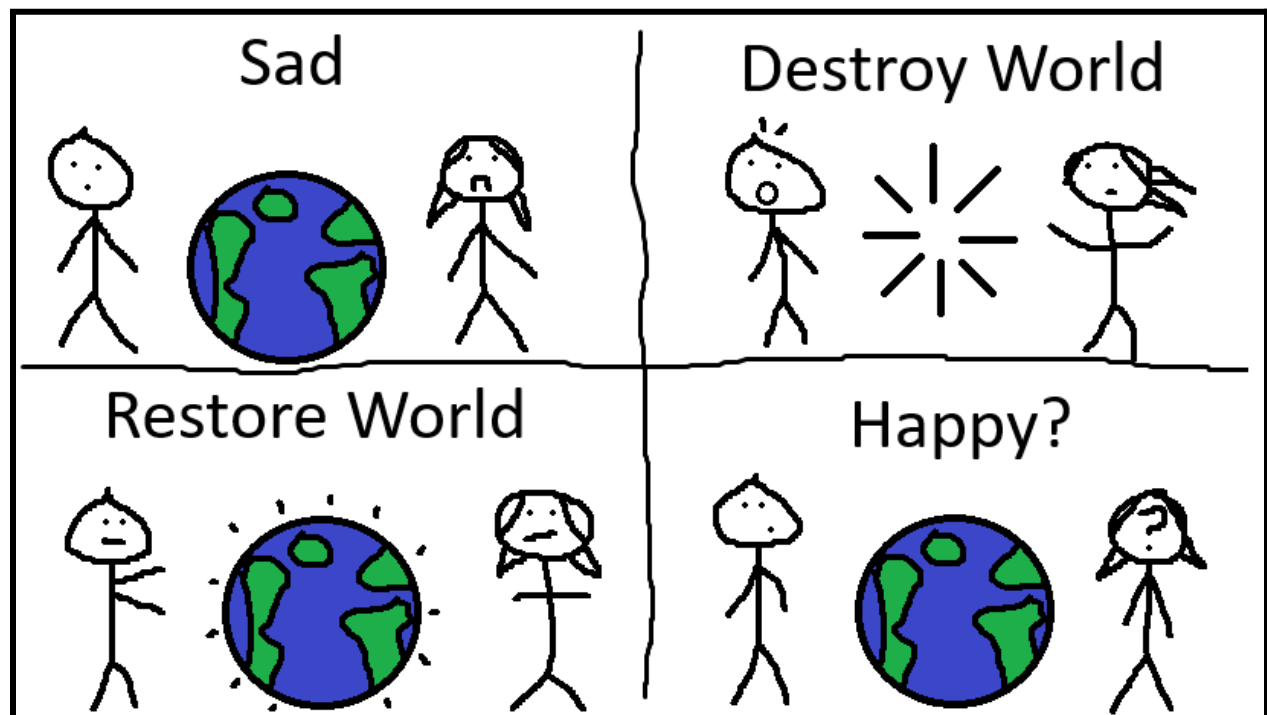
Suzumia cannot be said to be a victim. She is doing just fine at her new school, where she is taking advantage of another boy instead of Kyon. Kyon is much the same, still having other friends who didn't disappear. Really, Nagato is the one under fire.

She is emotionless, of course, in her robot persona (although likely unhappy) and bombastically miserable as a bookworm. It's possible there is no emotional change, she just becomes more expressive. Of it's possible as a bookworm she's sad now, but more stable over a long time. This is never discussed in the movie so Kyon can't know. All he knows is that Nagato made the choice to stop being a robot and become something else.

Now, Nagato does leave clues so Kyon can undo all her hard work. She leaves easily enough clues that he'll figure out all this information, and be left with the dilemma as presented. This changes the dilemma! She didn't attempt to cover up her tracks, she wanted to be thwarted, she wanted to pose the issue to someone other than herself. Furthermore, she planned this all out three years in advance. I will make a metaphor now.

Imagine a person hangs herself, but not in the heat of despair. Imagine she sends a formal invitation, and schedules the hanging, and, before jumping off the chair, hands you a brand new hacksaw. You now have the ability to cut the rope. But you have to, like, climb up there and do it. Besides, there's a spare body in the corner that your friend's soul will go into after the one committing suicide passes away. Is it still suicide? Why were you invited? What is the right thing to do? It it to contemplate which version of her you like better?

I don't know the answers to these questions, except the last one which is "no." I only know that the movie didn't ask a single one, even though they were waiting there to be asked. The movie, of course, survives by It-Did-Other-Things-Right, and I got a nice blog post out of it missing something, so I'm not mad. I'm only secondhand offended.



Here's my conclusion. All art promotes its author's worldview. The clumsiest way, short of being Ayn Rand, is this. Start with a character who *feels* vaguely opposite the worldview, and have them come around to it in a very specific way. For example, you might have characters who look like hippies but don't do any actual hippie things, moving back to the family ranch. This movie is the same. It's *as if* Kyon resents Suzumia—no specifics, of course—and in the end he says very precise things he likes about her. Thus is his excuse to restore the world.

So, yep. Movie's good. Looks nice, decent prose, pretty intense mystery that I spoiled for you. Content warning: it is anime. 8/10.