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### A Case of Animated Psychology: The Utility of Bodies in *Howl's Moving Castle*

Hayao Miyazaki's 2004 animated film, *Howl's Moving Castle*, a loose adaptation of Diana Wynne Jones's 1986 book, creates a magical doppelgänger of the western European world that is still regularly screened worldwide. The film achieved critical and commercial success, picking up several nominations including Best Animated Feature by the 78<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards and the 2007 Nebula Award for Best Script. In the film's world, psychological and physical pressures—especially issues associated with identity and societal obligations—are portrayed as magically altering the characters' physical bodies. Miyazaki uses exaggerated bodily metamorphosis to draw attention to the psychological changes within the characters as forces in their environment compel them to assimilate and sacrifice their individual identities so that they can become utilitarian objects. Their acquiescence then leads toward their own destruction.

Throughout the film, Howl, Sophie, and the Witch of the Waste go through drastic visual transformations that mirror their psychological states. Although Howl's transformation is the most physically severe, the story unfolds around Sophie, a young woman cursed by the Witch of the Waste, one of the parties pursuing Howl. This curse transforms Sophie into an old woman, materializing her temporally distorted psychological state. Determined to hide her transformation from her mother and coworkers, she flees to the countryside where she finds Howl's Castle, itself in constant

motion fleeing its pursuers. As the war and its effects close in, Howl fights to keep warplanes away from his home and cities, but in doing so, he begins to transform into a monstrous black raven, symbolic of his degenerating humanity and identity. Howl's fluctuating psychological state is embodied throughout the film by both his mutable physical body and home. In examining "the animated poetics of space" (194), Cheng-Ing Wu argues that "the cinematic castle-space is created as a symbol of Howl's psyche, a complex symbol that links together Howl's inner beast, childhood memory and internal conflicts" (194). However, examining the castle's changes alongside the characters' reveals that the cinematic castle-space is a symbol for the family's psyche. An analysis of the physical and psychological changes in these characters reveals how Miyazaki uses their bodies to interrogate traditional familial and societal values.

Miyazaki has developed his visual animation style over the last five decades, beginning as an animator for the children's TV show, *Okami shōnen Ken* (1963). Animation, as a predominantly visual medium, shares many common, foundational elements with live action film to simulate life through artificial reproduction. Ralph Hulett—accomplished painter and a Disney background artist for three decades—explains, "The cartoon in motion is a process of illusion. Separate drawings, inked upon celluloid and projected upon a screen at the rate of 24 per second, create the semblance of life. By experience, we attribute life to any object which seems to move of its own volition" (34). On a foundational level, both live action and animation use the illusion of moving pictures to tell stories. In animation, the images are drawn, whereas live action requires material subjects and physical spaces, making their differences essentially those of paintings and photography. In fact, Miyazaki still incorporates hand-

painted landscapes in his works to produce a sort of handmade artisan quality as opposed to the now common computer-generated ones found in both animation and live action films today.

Dani Cavallaro notes that animations use of created images as opposed to live actions use of captured images creates “an obvious element of unreality.” Cavallaro goes on to argue, “The very knowledge that a movie is an animation points to its artificial status, to the materiality of the image and to the process of its construction” (27). It should be noted that artificiality is not unique to animation; after all, live action too has an inherent artificiality—most people understand that what they are seeing is not reality but an interpretation of it—but animation’s artificiality is a step beyond that of live action because everything in it is an abstraction of reality. This creates a difference in what audiences will accept from each. Animated characters are inherently less physically real than live action characters; visual artists materialize them, actors provide them a voice, and writers create their dialogue. The amalgamation of these layers brings these animated characters into existence. This additional artificiality can be problematic because audiences need to develop a deep enough connection to the characters for the story to be successful.

In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Miyazaki is able to utilize animation’s potentially detrimental artificiality to create a unique character, Howl’s Castle. This is not meant in the cliché sense where some inanimate thing has a sense of character, but a literal character. The castle has an emotive face and mobile body, and it has its own physical and psychological character arcs. Since animation requires a higher suspense of disbelief, at least visually speaking, the expectations for a character’s physical form can

be more inclusive and abstract. Miyazaki uses the audiences' implicit additional mental leeway to expand the possibilities of what a character can be. This expansion of possibilities is accomplished in a number of ways. In addition to the previously described alienation, Miyazaki uses characters' physical changes to materialize their psychological states which creates a signal for character.

Like the Castle, as Howl, Sophie, and the Witch of the Waste face life altering obstacles, their bodies radically transform ~~that reflect changes in their psyche~~. This exposes a fundamental connection between these characters' materialities and ~~psychological state~~ psyches. This is first presented in the teenaged milliner, Sophie. After the opening credits roll, she is shown at her workbench creating hats in a small room filled with colorful materials and hats. Through an open door, young women discuss their plans to go out and have a good time. One of the shop girls invites Sophie and tells her that she should join them, but Sophie declines opting to stay alone and work. On their way out, the girls notice through a window Howl's castle off in the distance. One of them says, "Do you think Howl will go into town? We better stick close together" another girl responds, "Did you hear what happened to that girl Martha, from South Haven? They say Howl tore her heart out" (Miyazaki). This opening scene creates a stark contrast between Sophie and the other young women and indicates that society views Howl as a dangerous monster.

After this scene, Sophie goes to check on her sister, Lettie, who works at a pastry shop. Her sister is bubbly, happy, and personable, another contrast to Sophie. In this scene and throughout the movie, Sophie makes self-deprecating remarks about her looks saying things such as "No he wouldn't. Howl only does that to beautiful girls"

(Miyazaki). This is in response to Lettie urging her to be careful, so her heart isn't eaten by Howl. As Sophie is leaving, Lettie asks, "Do you really want to spend the rest of your life in that hat shop?" Sophie responds, "The shop was just so important to father. And I'm the oldest, I don't mind" (Miyazaki). Her statements and actions reveal that she acts abnormally older than those in her age group, implying that she is letting her life pass her by. This indicates that her psyche is temporally distorted—she is a young woman trapped in the psychological state of an old woman brought on by the stress of keeping a part of her father alive through taking care of his shop. Once this temporal disturbance is established in her character, Sophie undergoes her first transformation. Upon arriving back at the hat shop after hours, she is followed in by the Witch of the Waste who, out of jealousy for Sophie being around Howl, curses Sophie. In an instant, Sophie becomes a ninety-year-old woman. The next morning, looking into a mirror, she remarks, "This isn't so bad, now is it? You're still in pretty good shape. And your clothes finally suit you" (Miyazaki). This shows that it clearly isn't only her clothes that match this new body. Sophie's curse materializes her psyche.

After fleeing to the wastes, Sophie is picked up by Howl's castle as it wanders the waste. She meets Markl, Howl's young apprentice, and Calcifer, a fire demon who powers and controls the Castle though is also cursed. The entry door to Howl's castle is a magical portal that is controlled by a wheel quartered into four colors to indicate the various locations. Among these colors is a black quarter which leads to a dark and violent location that is seemingly tied to the violence of the war that Howl is resisting. Each time Howl travels back from the black portal, he progressively becomes more ravenous and beastly. Calcifer tells him, "You shouldn't keep flying around like that.

Soon you won't be able to turn back into a human" (Miyazaki). Howl tells Calcifer that he was attacked by "hack wizards who turned themselves into monsters for the king" (Miyazaki). Howl then remarks that this idiotic war is destroying everything. This includes Howl. Before the war, Howl is depicted as a flamboyant, androgynous young person with a boyish face and long blonde hair. He wore green earrings, a necklace, rings, and a flashy pink and grey diamond coat trimmed in gold and worn like a cape. But as the pressures that accompany the war build on him, his increased efforts to escape his obligations lead him to become less like a person and more like an inhuman tool of war. Howl, to this point, has been unable to summon the courage he needs to turn and face his problems. This changes when Sophie comes along and imbues him with the courage he has been lacking.

When Sophie agrees to go in Howl's place to the palace, she runs into the Witch of the Waste who has also been summoned. To get into the palace, each of them must climb a staircase. This physical act, unaided by magic, reduces the Witch of the Waste to a sweat-drenched mound of skin, and once inside, her magic is ritualistically taken, leaving her drastically aged and almost senile. This physical transformation strips away her veneer to portray her for who she is. This moment is a major structural shift in the narrative. Here, the role of antagonist shifts to Madame Suliman when she nearly kills Sophie and tries to turn Howl into the beast he cannot return from, and the Witch of the Waste becomes the family's grandmother figure. These three characters' physical transformations create an expectational cue so that the audience associates physical transformation with character development. This indicator combined with Miyazaki's use of animation and the physical simulacrum that the castle bares to a living creature—

eyes, mouth, tongue, ears, and feet—are the foundational elements that enable the castle to become a character. This helps to explain the emotional response elicited from the castle's destruction after Sophie cuts the magical connection between the castle and her house in Market Chipping to save Howl.

Once the castle is understood to be a character, its physical transformation, including the implications that transformations have on identity in the film, falls into line with the other transforming characters. Each of these characters has a physical story arc that mirrors their psychological arcs. Howl has matured into a courageous young man, and his wardrobe has been simplified to a plain shirt, pair of pants, and necklace. He no longer resembles a flamboyant rock star. Sophie is an assertive, confident young woman with starlight hair. The Witch of the Waste has become a part a family—she is no longer destructively selfish, power hungry, and manipulative. The Castle is a flying, well-organized home powered by a free Calcifer. The animated body possessed by Calcifer is a material being and symbol that reflects the family's psychological entity. This being has a collective identity, not the usual individuality identity. This doesn't indicate that Miyazaki is advocating for abandoning individuality rather it draws attention to how others and circumstances shape who we are able to be.

This collective understanding of individuality is only one of the ways that Miyazaki uses his characters to subvert normal ideologies. Lesley Anne Shore argues that Miyazaki's heroines subvert gender expectations that permeate Western art in her exploration of *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *My Neighbor Totoro*, *Spirited Away*, and *Howl's Moving Castle*. Shore finds that these

films portray heroines as progressive role models who peacefully solve problems by restoring a harmonic equilibrium within the story's framework. His heroine-centric features are a contrast to Hollywood blockbusters that often characterize heroines as inferior, over-sexualized and incapable of intellectually solving the story's central problem. (1)

Sophie isn't oversexualized nor does she use sexuality to solve her problems. Turning into a ninety-year-old requires her to use her intellect as her main tool. While Howl tries and fails to stop the war machines in the normal patriarchal heroic way, violence and conquest, Sophie is able to save Howl, build a family, and stop the war without violence. In the end, Sophie's compassion is key to her success. Helping Turnip Head, the cursed prince, break his curse which leads to the end of the war, and her compassion for Heen and the Witch of the Waste leads to new friendships and family members. Sophie also challenges the notion of who a hero can be. After all, she saves her society from the position of an old cleaning lady.

Because the film is centered around the conflicts and pressures that war creates, understanding Miyazaki's views on the subject and its prevalent position in his mind allows for a more nuanced reading of his treatment of it. Susan Napier explains,

It was not satiety with Hollywood that caused Miyazaki's nonappearance at what would have been for most people a major celebratory moment. The director would later explain his disgust at the American-led invasion of Iraq as the prime motivator: "I felt an intense rage. For that reason I hesitated to accept the Academy Award... The war in Iraq had a great influence on me." Miyazaki's fury



over the Iraq invasion was strong enough to make him add a war theme to Howl.

(213)

Miyazaki's anger and discuss of the Iraq war influences his portrayal of war as a frivolous, destructive power grab. The only reason given for its cause is the missing prince. This shows that the governments of these kingdoms were willing to sacrifice their citizens for little to no reason. Images of flying battleships swimming through seas of fire are Miyazaki's caution and reminder of the human price of war. These images harken back to the destructive fire bombings in Isao Takahata's gut-wrenching 1988 *Grave of the Fireflies*, another Studio Ghibli film. Though *Howl's Moving Castle* is more lighthearted and hopeful, this intertextual visual reference reveals an underlining severity in the film, and the violent beasts that the other wizards are permanently transmuted into portrays the price laden upon soldiers. Madame Suliman's corruption and luxurious surroundings illustrate that those in power create wars for their own self-interests. Howl is a threat because he is free from Suliman's indoctrination, in part, because he never finished his training with her. This enables Howl to understand the idiotic destruction and pointlessness of the war, spurring Suliman into pursuit of him so that he turns into the monster she needs him to become.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory reveals that Miyazaki uses Howl's monstrous body to subvert a noble or patriotic view of war and those perpetuating it. This reveals the existential threats they pose to society. Cohen argues, "The monster is born only at this metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy... giving them life and an uncanny

independence” (Cohen 4). To Suliman, Howl’s body incorporates anxiety, fear, and desire because he is a threat to her power and out of her control. To understand how Miyazaki uses Howl as a subversive monster, he should first be viewed from the perspective of the common citizen. As mentioned earlier by the girls in the hat shop and Lettie, Howl is seen as a dangerous monster who eats pretty girls’ hearts. The other popular view of Howl is as a renegade, though this is a more subtle and implied view, coming from his unwillingness to submit to the war cause. Suliman tells Sophie that Howl is powerful and heartless so he must be brought in. Howl was Suliman’s apprentice which means he was trained to be of service to the king. His resistance can then be understood as betrayal or desertion. Cohen argues, “monsters born of political expedience and self-justifying nationalism function as living invitations to action, usually military (invasions, usurpations, colonizations), the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others” (13). Suliman attacks Howl, who evades capture by wandering around the borders of the kingdom. She fears the freedom and individual thinking that he represents therefore threatening her authority.

Howl’s violent resistance and sabotage transform his body and mind into a monstrous bird beast that reaches its apex of monstrous physicality as it rips apart the warplanes bombing Sophie’s hat shop, which furthers Suliman’s ability to justify her pursuit of him. For a moment, Howl bares a striking resemblance to a kaiju, which in Japanese means strange creature. To western audiences, a kaiju is usually a large destructive monster like Godzilla. At this moment, the threat and futility of this path are made clear. If he continues, he will be destroyed. Monsters are created to satiate the

greed and self-interest of those in power. By showing how and to what ends monsters are perpetuated, Miyazaki lays out the true locus of the existential threat, war hawks. This representation seems to show first, the monsters are not the true societal threats; and second, the monsters are the creations, pawns, and victims of the government. Since the audience is privy to Howl's story, they understand that he is a person, not the monster he is made into in by his society. This argues for critical thinking, skepticism, and against blind patriotism.

In the final scene, as the family flies through the clouds, its growth is on full display. It has grown into a visual representation of the utopian heteronormative ideal family—a young boy with his dog, a grandmother taking care of him and relaxing, and a young man and woman in love with a home that takes care of itself. The viewer knows their story, and that they just look like what a family is expected to look like. This makes them an argument for a nontraditional family to be allowed to have all of the happiness and success that accompanies traditional ideals. They are a visual representation of the good life, not a threat to the traditional understanding of a biologically based nuclear family. The only real threat in the film is the war and those that start them. After all, this family has seemingly single-handedly prevented the complete destruction of their society.

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