



Connecting the Pieces in *Howl's Moving Castle*

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This article refers to the English-dubbed Disney release.

Directed by Hayao Miyazaki, *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) is loosely based on Diana Wynne Jones' fantasy novel of the same name. Miyazaki has taken and reinterpreted a number of elements from the source text, such as the eponymous castle, the vain wizard, and the young female protagonist who has a spell cast on her that turns her into an elderly woman. Most notably, however, in response to the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, he decided to construct the film narrative around the novel's passing reference to an imminent war.¹ Rather like the slug-like henchmen, the war infiltrates every part of the film's story, complicating and intensifying the relationships being developed and explored. According to the film's producer Toshio Suzuki, the war theme gave Miyazaki the opportunity to explore 'the qualities that make people human and enable them to retain their humanity in a world brutalized by bloodshed and greed'.² In *Howl's Moving Castle*, this idea is communicated through the strange but mostly functional community that the protagonist, Sophie (voiced by Emily Mortimer as the young version of the character and Jean Simmons as the elderly version), creates out of the disparate collection of characters she meets after arriving at the castle.

In the English-dubbed Disney version of *Howl's Moving Castle*, most of the characters are voiced by well-known actors with distinctive and recognisable voices, most notably Lauren Bacall as the Witch of the Waste and Billy Crystal as Calcifer. When asked about the American dub, Miyazaki pointed out that, whether subtitled or revoiced, any work in translation will lose the nuances of the original, but he also suggested that Bacall's characterisation of the Witch of the Waste brought an extra dimension to the character.³ Regardless of the relative strengths of the two casts, the English-language version of the film highlights – for English-speaking viewers – the pieced-together eclecticism of the film's cultural and physical landscape.

Apparently inspired by the Alsace region of France, the film's towns and the surrounding alpine landscape draw on the associations attached to the European fairytale tradition: half-timbered houses, grand palaces, enchanted natural landscapes. However, these conventionally timeless associations are unsettled by time-based references to the impact of industrialisation. For instance, Sophie's pretty home town is introduced through a pall of black smoke emanating both from factory chimneys and a particularly polluting steam train. In keeping with this industrial context, the costumes and furnishings associated with Sophie and the townsfolk are Edwardian. Yet in contrast to the factories, trains and domestic spaces, the flying machines are fantastical, 'reminding us that in Miyazaki's cosmos, machines are capable of flying as one does in dreams – namely unfettered by either gravity or gear'.⁴ The war is fought with a range of monstrous machines, such as multi-winged beasts of the air flying in formation, insect-like aero-kayaks, and a lumbering behemoth of an airship disgorging a seemingly endless supply of bombs.

Incorporating the anachronisms associated with a steampunk aesthetic, this is an imaginative space where a sedan chair carried

by liveried slugs shares the road with steam-powered automobiles, while airships with propellers take couples dressed in their Sunday best out for an afternoon spin. This is also a world that conjures up the decidedly unfantastical devastation caused by aerial bombing – with Sophie's view of her burning home town 'invok[ing] the infamous bombing of Dresden during World War II'.⁵ Within this context, the voice work in the English-language version – Crystal's New York drawl, Bacall's Chandleresque tones and Mortimer's cut-glass English accent – becomes another element in the mixture of alternative and shifting realities that characterise the narrative world of the film.

The castle is central to this unpredictable and pieced-together universe. Emerging out of a shroud of mist in the opening moments of the film, the castle slowly and discordantly materialises, a grotesque mechanical beast that creaks, shudders and rumbles.

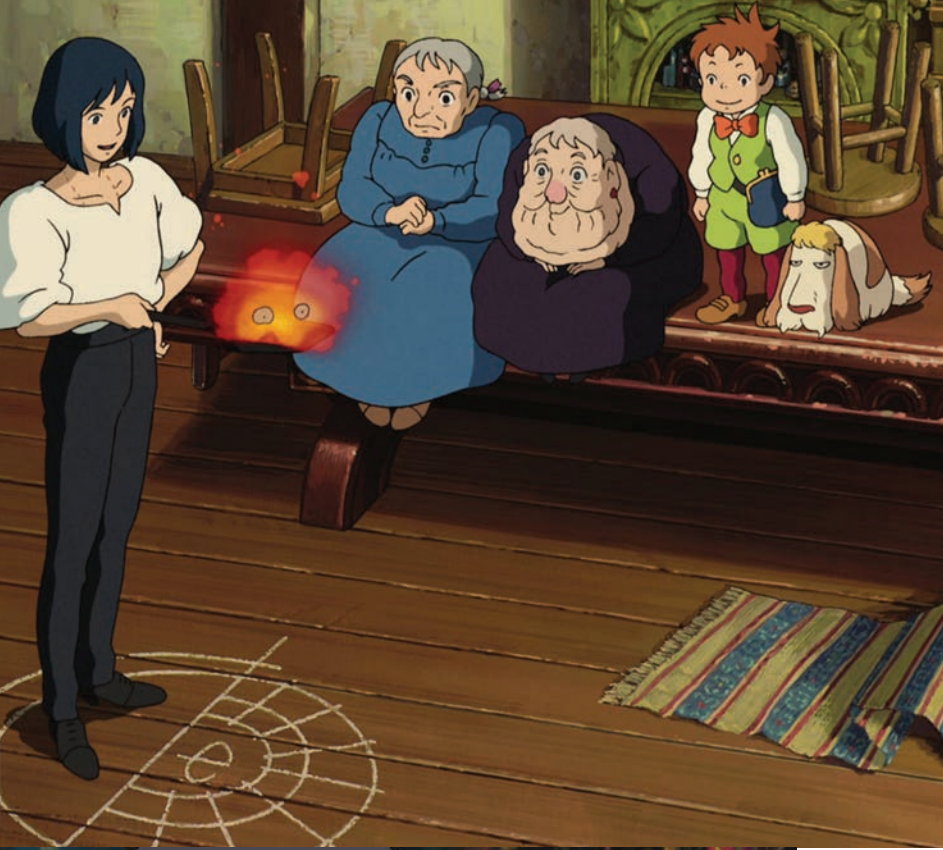
This Frankenstein's monster of a castle is bizarre rather than threatening and comical rather than frightening, thanks to the random absurdity of its various bits and pieces and the dogged tread of its four (!) chicken feet. The mist clears to reveal the first of many odd and incongruous juxtapositions as the gargantuan castle is shown to be lumbering through an otherwise classic scene of pastoral serenity. Dwarfed by this 'mobile ensemble of puffing and shuddering scrap iron',⁶ a toy-like shepherd brandishes his miniature crook at the unwelcome intrusion. Nevertheless, the impression is that life will continue on as usual once the castle has moved on. The barely discernible squadrons of planes that appear in the sky alongside the title of the film are far more ominous.

While made out of inorganic junk, the constantly adjusting, almost organic form of the castle (its design comprised more than eighty separate pieces⁷) reflects its function as a space where individual lives adapt, both to changing circumstances and to the needs of the group. The castle is a magic space of possibility, but only in response to the possibilities generated by its occupants. This responsiveness is reflected in the design of the castle, which draws on the traditional construction process of 'old Japanese homes that would be built up room by room' according to a family's needs.⁸ When Sophie first comes to the castle, the household dynamic based on community and tradition has broken down; the connections between the castle and its inhabitants are predetermined and unable to evolve.

Howl (Christian Bale), Calcifer and the castle are bound together by a spell caused by Howl swallowing a falling star. Calcifer may have possession of Howl's heart, but he, in turn, is chained to the castle. These constraints have denied the household the sense of shared purpose required to live together productively. Calcifer's euphoric response to Sophie's enthusiastic praise for his energetic powering of the castle is an indication of how disempowering it is to work without dignity and autonomy. Sophie's acknowledgement transforms Calcifer's servitude into work he can be proud of and paves the way for his decision at the conclusion of the film to remain part of the new family that has been created.

The dirty, chaotic mess that greets Sophie when she first arrives at the castle is in part a joke about the domestic incompetence



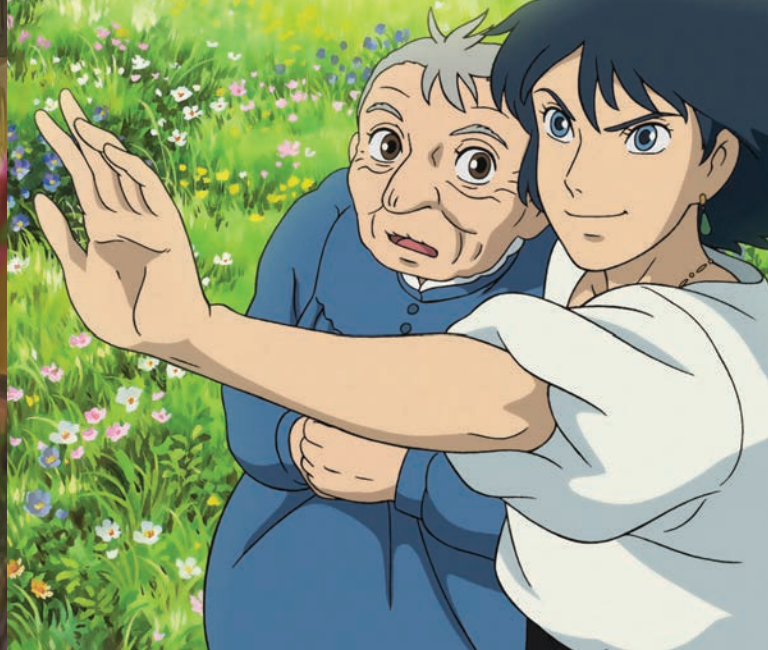


of this all-male household (even Calcifer resists getting cleaned out) but also signals a more significant spiritual inertia. Just as in *Spirited Away* (Hayao Miyazaki, 2001), dirt and disorder are associated with a failure to live one's life authentically, a theme that James W Boyd and Tetsuya Nishimura connect to the Shinto understanding that we need to 'cultivate a sound, pure and bright heart/mind, in order to act with genuine "sincerity" (*makoto*) toward others and the world'.⁹ Sophie, like Chihiro (Daveigh Chase) in *Spirited Away*, brings renewal by working hard to restore order. Not only is Sophie's cleaning prodigious, but she also makes

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changes in the daily lives of the castle household that helps them achieve more satisfying lives. Sophie's first contribution is to cook a hearty breakfast, an action that not only delights the hungry Markl (Josh Hutcherson) - 'I can't remember the last time we had a real breakfast!' - but also draws in and includes both Howl and Calcifer. In the same vein, Sophie's new way of arranging the firewood so that Calcifer can feed himself gives him a small taste of the freedom he craves.

Sophie tells Howl that she has been hired by Calcifer to clean up the castle, but cleaning and maintaining an orderly household is not a job - it is a shared responsibility of all the members of the household. One of the most harmonious scenes in the film involves Sophie, Markl and the scarecrow, Turnip Head, doing the laundry together. When Sophie is tired, Markl cheerfully takes over and puts the laundry away after it has dried. He has been transformed from the obstreperous and rather rude boy that Sophie first meets into a willing and considerate participant in the running of the household, a transformation that is quite movingly communicated through the image of the pair walking towards the castle



with the tiny Markl hefting the large kitchen chair that Sophie had been sitting on.¹⁰

The change that Sophie brings is not without its dangers. Howl fortuitously enters the kitchen just in time to prevent Calcifer being extinguished as a result of Sophie's indefatigable cleaning, an event that would have also destroyed Howl and the castle. As a result of Sophie tidying and reorganising the magic potions in the bathroom, Howl's hair changes colour after he bathes. This unleashes a frenzy of fury and devastation after Howl despairs: 'I give up; I see no point in living if I can't be beautiful.' Calling on the spirits of darkness, he begins to melt into a gluey green mess that oozes towards Calcifer's flames and threatens to destroy them both. Sophie dismisses this extraordinary response as a tantrum, highlighting the regressive narcissism that, at this point, makes Howl an ineffectual member of the castle's fledgling family unit. Yet after Howl surfaces from the depths of his despair, the hair becomes associated with the positive changes wrought by Sophie as well as Howl's increasing capacity to direct his gaze away from his own selfish needs and desires.

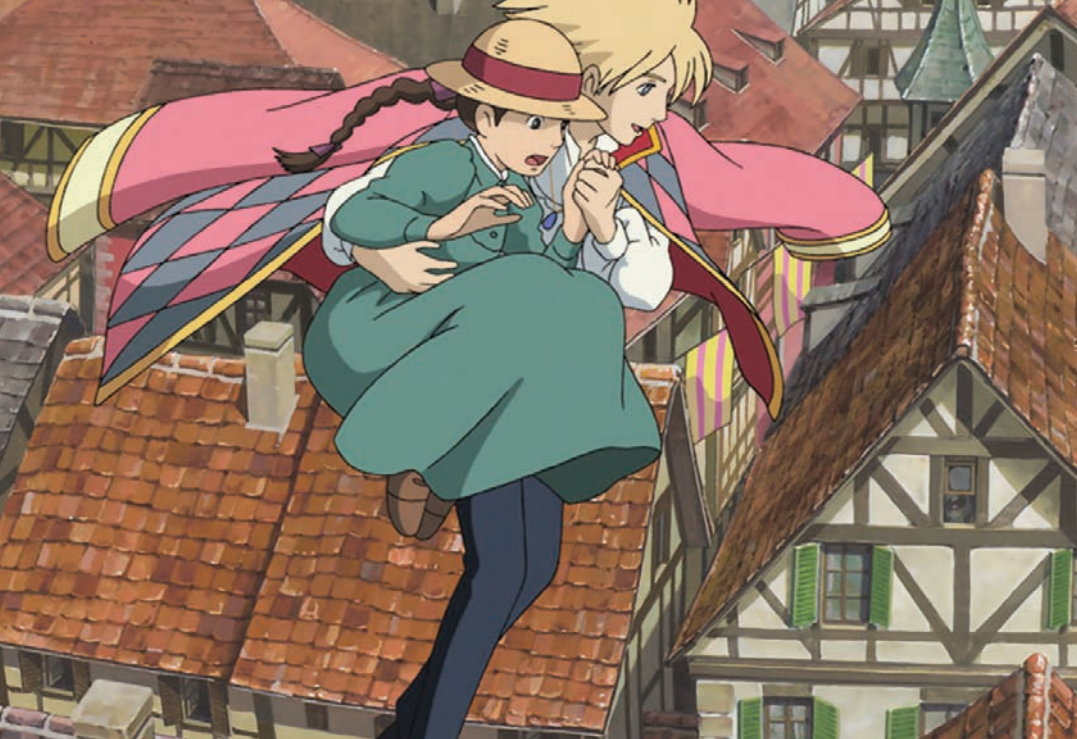
In turn, the castle breathes new life into Sophie. 'Sick of being treated like some timid little old lady', she attacks the task of cleaning like a kind of unstoppable domestic warrior. For ninety-year-old Sophie, old age becomes a form of freedom, not only giving her the confidence to be herself but also to take risks and act decisively. The Witch of the Waste turned eighteen-year-old Sophie into an old lady to punish her for being seen with the desirable Howl. The witch's aim was to take away something both precious and powerful: youth and all the dreams and opportunities that come with it. However, Sophie's youth has offered her few possibilities. She is

stuck looking after her dead father's hat shop out of a sense of duty, and is so obliging and self-effacing that she barely exists. From the first moment we meet Sophie, we are made aware of the limitations of her existence by the pall of smoke that restricts her view out of the window. When she does leave the shop to visit her sister, she is harassed by soldiers whose menacing attentions are a reminder of the lack of freedom that is so often experienced by young women in public spaces.

In contrast, one of the things that distinguish ninety-year-old Sophie as a character is her dogged determination to make her way across or into any space she chooses. She makes her journey into the Waste against the advice of the farmer from whom she had hitched a lift: 'You're crazy if you do this, Grandma. There's nothing but witches and wizards out there.' However, she is deaf to his admonition and heads off with single-minded determination. Sophie's climb up the mountain is thematically linked with her valiant struggle up the steps of the King's palace (carrying the extremely heavy Heen). In each of these cases, Sophie's determination to reach her goal is part of an identity-building process of 'becoming'. While young Sophie's identity was based on effacement and a negation of the self, ninety-year-old Sophie is determined to assert her presence and her will. She very quickly assumes a position of authority in the castle, overriding Markl's and Calcifer's attempts to rein in her energetic determination to put their household in order. As she asserts herself, she becomes increasingly animated: 'These little outbursts seem to be giving me some energy.'

Sophie's energetic renewal and reorganisation of the castle and its inhabitants are accompanied by her delight in the access the castle gives her to a range of new experiences. No longer





constrained by a life that she has not chosen, Sophie is greedy for the new experiences and places she is presented with. Thrilled by the discovery that the door of the castle opens to a range of different places, she instantly and impulsively checks them all out. Her mischievous delight is presented as childlike, something underscored by Markl's repressive 'Leave it alone, Grandma! I'm getting angry.'

Miyazaki's films are renowned for its young – often female – protagonists who act with courage and integrity when faced with apocalyptic scenarios and 'bear the burden of preventing destruction and creating (or recreating) a better world'.¹¹ In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Grandma Sophie takes on this role but melds it with the humour and fatalism that comes with age: 'Well, the nice thing about being old is that you've got nothing much to lose.' In contrast to Sophie, Markl has lost the child's innocence that Miyazaki's films typically connect with hope for the future – a loss that, along with his rudeness towards Sophie (a shocking sign of disrespect to an elder), is portrayed comically with his bearded disguise. One of Sophie's gifts to the group is to restore Markl's

diverse fragments. Referring to criticisms (primarily from Western viewers) about the occasionally indecipherable plot, Miyazaki has commented: 'what that means is just that [viewers] have a set definition of how a story is supposed to be told'.¹³ Similarly, the idiosyncratic characters that populate the world of the film are distinguished by their continually metamorphosing identities. Rather than working towards a resolution that ties together the individual narrative elements, the film highlights the impact of changing circumstances and relationships on experience and behaviour. This narrative impulse involves a rejection of any simple dichotomy between good and evil, and instead conceives of experience as fluid and relational. The Witch of the Waste's portrayal foregrounds this organising principle. She is introduced as a classic villain, driven by irrational jealousy to deliver the curse of old age on Sophie, but, after the witch's magic is destroyed by Madame Suliman, Sophie takes her in, nurturing her as lovingly as she would her own grandmother. The witch is not immediately transformed by Sophie's generosity, but she ultimately abandons her desire for Howl's heart in response to Sophie's pleas and for the good of their new family.

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childhood, a process that begins with him joining her on the balcony to admire the view of Star Lake and is completed when he begs Sophie not to leave, tells her he loves her and declares the odd household 'a family'. Howl, on the other hand, has been compared to Peter Pan in his failure to grow up, a characterisation that becomes a 'reflection on the limits of masculinity, portrayed as both nobly idealist and incorrigibly childish, except when redeemed by love'.¹² Not only does Sophie's love transform Howl, but it also puts an end to the war. After seeing the newly formed family in her crystal ball, Madame Suliman (Blythe Danner) declares that 'the game is over' and calls off 'this idiotic war'.

The narrative of *Howl's Moving Castle* is rather like the castle itself – a constantly evolving structure made out of a jumble of

The characters' reactions to the war similarly highlight the importance of the way both individuals and communities respond to life's challenges. In Howl's case, his spiritual emptiness leads him to oscillate between near-catatonic immobility and a self-destructive attempt to fight against the act of war itself. Sophie offers an alternative response based on decisive action, clear communication and honesty: 'See the king. Give him a piece of your mind. Tell him this war is pointless.' That Howl responds to this suggestion by cooking up a complicated scheme involving Sophie impersonating his mother is another example of his immaturity and selfishness. Howl comes close to being destroyed by the violence of war, but is ultimately saved by his connection to and place within the small community that Sophie has gathered around her.



Sophie brings with her the dynamic energy necessary for change and renewal, but she often has to fumble around for appropriate responses to the problems and confusions associated with interpreting both human and magical situations and consequences. Her initial impulse is to establish order within the castle household, and she does this with grit and determination. However, as she finds out more about the castle and Howl, she learns to respond more intuitively to situations as they arise. Anxious that Howl will be killed if he keeps trying to protect her and the others from being endangered by the bombing raid, Sophie destroys the castle by removing Calcifer. At this point, neither Sophie nor Calcifer can predict the consequences of these actions. Having detached the castle from its connection to the besieged hat shop, she then works with Calcifer to cobble some of the castle back together and move it temporarily to safety before it collapses once more. In the end, the castle is transformed from a battleship to a suburban paradise replete with garden furniture and pet dog; it is also, for the first time, actually a flying – rather than a walking – castle.

The events that lead to the return of Howl's heart are a complex jigsaw and only Sophie is able to bring all the pieces together. The final vision of this eccentric family at home in their refurbished castle is a testament to Sophie's hard work in bringing each of the family members into the group. The dark underside of this unity is the fact that the war that had engulfed them was begun and ended on an impulse and could just as easily begin again. Nevertheless, the image of the castle disappearing into the blue sky beyond the clouds bears with it an idealistic hope for the future based on the values of community and mutual responsibility.

This film can be purchased from <www.theeducationshop.com.au>.

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Endnotes

¹ For an extended account of the impact of the Iraq War on the film, see Lindsay Smith, 'War, Wizards, and Words: Transformative Adaptation and Transformed Meanings in *Howl's Moving Castle*', *The Projector Film and Media Journal*,

vol. 11, no. 1, Fall/Spring 2011, <<http://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/theatrefilm/projector/04-01-11/page96214.html>>, accessed 3 April 2014.

² Dani Cavallaro, *The Animé Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, McFarland, Jefferson, 2006, p. 171. Cavallaro is paraphrasing producer Toshio Suzuki.

³ See Xan Brooks, 'A God Among Animators', *The Guardian*, 14 September 2005, <<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2005/sep/14/japan.awardsandprizes>>, accessed 3 April 2014.

⁴ Cavallaro, op. cit., p. 163.

⁵ Smith, op. cit., p. 46.

⁶ Cavallaro, op. cit., p. 187.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 167.

⁸ Ian Condry, *The Soul of Anime: Collaborative Creativity and Japan's Media Success Story*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, 2013, p. 150.

⁹ James W Boyd & Tetsuya Nishimura, 'Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film *Spirited Away*', *The Journal of Religion and Film*, vol. 8, no. 2, October 2004, <<https://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol8No2/boydShinto.htm>>, accessed 3 April 2014.

¹⁰ This is also an example of Miyazaki's narrative principle of *ma*, which values the spaces between the action: 'If you just have non-stop action with no breathing space at all, it's just busyness. But if you take a moment, then the tension building in the film can grow into a wider dimension.' Quoted in Roger Ebert, 'Hayao Miyazaki Interview', 12 September 2002, <<http://www.rogerebert.com/interviews/hayao-miyazaki-interview>>, accessed 3 April 2014.

¹¹ Susan J Napier, 'The Anime Director, the Fantasy Girl and the Very Real Tsunami', *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, vol. 10, issue 11, no. 3, March 2012, <http://www.japanfocus.org/-susan_j_napier/3713>, accessed 3 April 2014.

¹² Andrew Osmond, 'Castles in the Sky', *Sight and Sound*, October 2005, p. 31, <<http://old.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/486>>, accessed 3 April 2014.

¹³ Quoted in Devin Gordon, 'A "Positive Pessimist"', *Newsweek*, 19 June 2005, <<http://www.newsweek.com/positive-pessimist-119801>>, accessed 4 April 2014.

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