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How can films offer a path to resistance in a world that increasingly needs direction?

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I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Introduction.

It is widely acknowledged that the persistence of neoliberal capitalism is one of the most pressing issues of our time. Its provocation of the worst of human greed has led to an alarmingly disturbed ecosystem, an unreal political reality, and unacceptable living conditions for most of the peoples of the world. Through a massive rise in popularity of socialist leanings, the disdain towards capitalism has become clear. So what can be done to change this? This essay will discuss and investigate how film, one of the most accessible and widely consumed artforms, and particularly film of the mainstream, can catalyse change. This essay will posit that film can create new narratives through which life can be reimagined and that films by directors who have a personal experience with resisting the forms of capitalism as mentioned above, as well as authoritarianism, have especially relevant clues to provide as to how to create a better world, and, through visuals and storytelling, what it might look like. Ultimately, this essay will find that new worlds can be imagined, in the form of films and by activist groups, and that stories can become realities. At the end, social change is reliant on people; on their willingness to critically engage with the media they consume, and on their capacity for empathy and compassion. This essay will suggest that a better world is not only possible, but within our grasp.

Chapter One.

(i) Setting the Scene.

'Eat the Rich!' proclaims TikTok. 'Custom guillotine earrings?' ventures Etsy. 'Swipe right if you vote left' asserts Tinder (Jones, 2021). The rise in popularity of left-leaning politics online is apparent for all to see, no matter one's choice in social media: in film alone this is apparent. This is 'Generation Left', a term coined for those born since around 1979 (Meadway, 2021). Recent developments worldwide have given prominence to this inclination, as the global capitalist system manufactures worse and worse crises. Two events in 2020 highlighted the predilection towards leftist values online: the murder of George Floyd, a Black man, by a Minneapolis policeman and the escalation of the novel coronavirus, Covid-19. It was clear in the wake of these events that our current systems are insufficient in dealing with the complex array of issues that we face in our modern times. The Covid-19 pandemic revealed how much neoliberal reforms had disabled public sectors, especially in the West, as the 'virus struck hardest - thus far- in the richest, most powerful nations of the world' (Roy, 2020, p.204). And when George Floyd's murder was brought to light, there was a global, incandescent grief. But how to express this in the middle of a worldwide quarantine? While there were numerous marches, demonstrations, and artistic responses worldwide, what was really remarkable was the sheer amount of online activism. The turmoil following the murder of George Floyd featured an outburst of online infographics (Nyugen, 2020). They circulated petitions, listed who and where to give donations, and recommended useful sources for further education on the issues faced by Black people, particularly in the United States of America. And while this version of online activism - resharing, reposting, reblogging - has been around for a while, it has morphed into something different. This type of activism can

fall into Instagram stories and Twitter threads, and struggle to climb out into the real world. Furthermore, the very nature of social media limits our attention span (Stefanski, 2020) and therefore our ability to follow through on these activist outlets, even solely online. Thereby, there is a definite possibility that ‘social media siphons activist energy’ (Forthomme, 2020).

So it is clear, then, that online activism is not the whole answer to the question of how to best affect change in our world. And certainly, it cannot be, for this left-leaning tendency is precarious. Meadway writes that while the detrimental effects of our current system have led to a ‘radical critique of capitalism’, it does not ensure a better future (2021). In fact, it could lead to the exact opposite; ‘the harsh reality is that young people’s attachment to any given set of socialist or even social democratic ideas and policies is rather weak’ (Meadway, 2021). Generation Left have never experienced any government or system but neoliberal capitalism. And, as Naomi Klein writes in her deeply affecting *The Shock Doctrine*, ‘with socialism still closely associated with decades of brutality carried out in its name, public anger has few outlets for expression except nationalism and protofascism’ (2008, p. 449). These extreme politics, on each side, are both assuaged and exacerbated by their ‘retreat into closed circuits’ (Fisher, 2009, p.75), into ‘feedback loops and echo chambers that reinforce whatever opinion you started out with’ (Meadway, 2021), where users are never confronted by ‘other points of view in a contested public space’ (Fisher, 2009, p.75).

And even more pressingly, it is clear that worldwide, these ‘closed circuits’ have led not just to a dispassionate neoliberal capitalism, but to fully fledged fascism. It is

here. It is everywhere; 'in the case of Western societies... democracy is in decline' (Chomsky, 2021, p.64), 'India embraces majoritarian Hindu nationalism... a polite term for fascism' (Roy, 2020, p.161), and 'crisis conditions now affect the institutions of liberal democracy in the wealthiest capitalist states' (Charnley, 2017, p.3). Klein states that

'The powerful rejection of what the French call "savage capitalism" takes many different forms, including reactionary and racist ones. In the U.S., rage at the shrinking of the middle class has been easily redirected to calls for border fences, with CNN's Lou Dobbs leading a nightly campaign against the "invasion of illegal aliens" waging "war on the American middle class" - stealing jobs, spreading crime, as well as bringing in "highly contagious diseases" (2008, p.448).

She names Russia, Poland, and the Netherlands as also affected by this turn towards reactionary politics (2008, p.449). And while 'the infrastructure of fascism is staring us in the face, the pandemic is speeding up that process in unimaginable ways, and yet we hesitate to call it by its name' (Roy, 2020, p.4). Thus, despite encouraging social media trends, and perhaps even because of them, we cannot take our future for granted. For even today, 'liberal democracy loathes and fears the left... far more than it does the xenophobic right' (Charnley, 2017, p.3). We must fight for our continued existence, our future. We must create it.

(ii) What Art Can Do: Action!

What is needed then is a 'jolt' to action. We cannot roll our eyes as debates rage about whether anti-capitalism should be aestheticised into Met Gala dresses (Di Placido, 2021) and guillotine earrings. 'Indifference... was always the most important precondition for neoliberal reform' (Charnley, 2017, p.3); indifference, it seems, is a death sentence for our collective future. It is imperative that we care. And few things, if any, are better at provoking emotions than art. Art has often acted as 'a catalyst' (Lippard, 2017, p.xix) with such practices as 'photomontage or protest-performance' appropriated and used to great effect for activist purposes. (Bradley, 2007, p.10). Art can offer 'a jolt from unexpected and previously unconsidered angles' (Lippard, 2017, p.xix). And the most accessible, mainstream type of art, is, of course, film:

concepts such as 'injustice', 'racism', 'oppression', or 'colonization' are easily abstracted, stripping them of a connection to the lived experience of actual people. Film has the ability to counter this elision by providing a human face to these concepts... in... a comprehensible narrative... film offers a powerful way of fostering "hot cognition", meaning that the representation of a condition or situation carries charged emotional overtones and is likely to incite affect on the part of audiences (Davies).

It is obvious that real change is vital for the continued survival of our world as we (don't) know it, for 'the basic fact of modernity is that "we no longer believe in this world"' but it is only "...*this* world," that is, the world present to us, in which we are present'" (Rodowick, 2010, p.111). What is necessary is the creation of a world in which we *can* believe. Film can do this.

Chapter Two: Anti-Capitalist Filmmakers: Resisting Tropes.

(i) Introducing the Filmmakers.

This essay will outline how Hayao Miyazaki and Bong Joon-ho's films administer a jolt to the collective consciousness by bringing attention to the inherent wrongness of late-stage capitalism. While many filmmakers address these issues, due to the increasingly urgent situation worldwide, the vastly different way in which these directors tackle the same issues allow scope for multiple methods of 'reimagining' (Roy, 2020, p.6). These directors have also been chosen specifically because of their mainstream success, as well as their efficiency in confronting these issues, which in part can be attributed to their own encounters with aggressive forms of disaster capitalism. Klein notes that

'Once the mechanics of the shock doctrine are deeply and collectively understood, whole communities become harder to take by surprise, more difficult to confuse - shock resistant' (2008, p. 459).

The 'shock doctrine' she refers to is a disaster capitalist strategy whereby corporations wait 'for a major crisis, then [sell] off pieces of the state to private players while citizens [are] still reeling from the shock, [and] then quickly [make] the "reforms" permanent' (2008, p.6). Klein also discloses that the secret to resisting this particular brand of disaster capitalism, which has been utilised since the 1970's, is our 'collective memory of past shocks' (2008, p.463). For that reason, Miyazaki and Joon-ho, who have come into contact with, if not the shock doctrine itself, some form of authoritarianism, are best positioned to craft films which communicate not only criticism but methods of resisting neoliberal capitalism. These directors have the ability to deliver a 'jolt' (Lippard, 2017, p.xix), to 'smuggle politics through the back door of a familiar setting' (Sholette, 2017, p.142), and, in doing so, to aid the

audience in imagining an alternative reality for our world. 'Cinema must not film the world, but rather, belief in this world, our only link... To give us back belief in the world - this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being shoddy)' (Rodowick, 2010, p.111).

(ii) Bong Joon-ho on Capitalism.

(a) Bong's Capitalist Realism.

Bong was born in South Korea in 1969, 'under the rule of a military dictatorship,' and spent his time in college at protests, making "humanitarian" Molotov cocktails' (Jung, 2019). Bong has an innate interest in the dynamics of class, and his films draw our attention to 'the absurdity of our current times. The foolishness of this era of polarisation' (Rose, 2020). Despite his claims that he is not a 'political filmmaker' (Sellar, 2015), many of his films, if not all, include stories about class divisions (Romain, 2019). In an explosion of films about class in the late 2010s, *Parasite* (2019) is the one to remember. Bong believes that "before it's a massive, sociological term, capitalism is just our lives" (Jung, 2019). Through the examination of *Snowpiercer* (2013), and the groundbreaking *Parasite* (2019), the implications of this statement will be discussed, as well as how to make it a fiction.

(b) Systems.

Mark Fisher notes that systems are near impossible to hold ethically responsible for their actions, and that this is precisely 'what is lacking in capitalism,' exactly what keeps it going, posing a crucial question: 'how is it possible to chastise a corporate structure (2009, p.69)?' Bong Joon-ho attempts to hold a system responsible in *Snowpiercer* (2013). In fact, in many of his films, he literally represents class systems and their divides - 'physical levels of the city and of the house making tangible the class divide' (Rupra, 2020). *Snowpiercer* is a dystopian film about the last of humanity. They live in a series of carriages on a train which circles the post-apocalyptic planet, and cannot stop. The back of the train eat 'protein blocks' made from cockroaches and struggle for space, where those at the front have

saunas and nightclubs. Curtis, our protagonist, wants to overthrow the front of the train, by fighting all the way from the very back to the engine room. The train represents late-stage neoliberal capitalism and the 'revolution', the endless battle for power. Until the end, it never occurs to any of the characters that there could be life outside it: 'What if we can live outside the train?' (Snowpiercer, 2013). *Parasite* (2019) documents the slow invasion of the home of a rich family, the Parks, by a poor family, the Kims. The Parks live on top of a hill in a spacious and impersonal home, where the Kims live mostly underground in a semi-basement. The Kims are hired one by one by the Parks, who have no knowledge of their relation to each other. Where *Snowpiercer* shows class and capitalism as a back and forth, where 'the Tail and the front are supposed to work together. We are all connected' (Snowpiercer, 2013), *Parasite* is an up and down composed of hills and stairs, absent of any class solidarity.

In both films, priority is given to those at the top; in *Snowpiercer*, the top have sushi and the bottom eat cockroaches; in *Parasite* rain ruins the Parks' camping trip but the Kims' home is completely submerged by it, shown in Fig. 1 - Bong shows how the material conditions of poor and working class people are worsened everyday by exploitative capitalism, and how those who are responsible get off with simply a ruined camping trip. In both films, the lower class covet the lives of the upper class, and in both films, this line of thought is met with failure, because: 'the goal of a genuinely new left should be not to take over the state but to subordinate the state to the general will' (Fisher, 2009, p.77). Both films represent extreme violence from each side, and as well as debate about who is the parasite in *Parasite*;

'In terms of labor, the rich can be considered parasites," Bong tells EW. "They have to leech off other people's labor for everything from driving to

housekeeping. Although they pay money, they live off the labor of others. But when I was first coming up with this narrative, when I first got the idea, I did focus more on the poor family as the parasites, because it all starts with them infiltrating the rich house, sort of like parasites entering the host' (Holub, 2019),

It becomes difficult to tell who is intended as the villain. Yes, Bong has a certain bias for the underdogs, or the represented working class in these films, but when each side is capable of such a degree of violence; in *Parasite* selfish murder, and in *Snowpiercer*, violent revolt, not to mention cannibalism; it is difficult to entirely sympathise with one party. The people on the other side of the 'humanitarian Molotovs' of his youth were 'young kids like us who got conscripted into the military and sent out' (Jung, 2019), which is why neither side in his films ever seems to be totally immoral. It is clear that the villain is 'the parasitic nature of capitalism' (Romain, 2019).

The immense popularity of *Parasite* revealed how global capitalism is. Bong thought he had made a specifically Korean film, from observing Seoul; 'I wanted to tell the story about people around me in neighborhoods that I encounter on a daily basis' (Paiella, 2019), but its worldwide popularity made him realize that we all inhabit the same country: capitalism (Hassler-Forest, 2020). It has been said that 'the term "national state" is a fiction' (Meinhof, 2001, p. 274), but rarely is it so clear.



Figure 1: The Kims salvage their belongings from their flooded home.

(c) Awakening Class Consciousness and Catalysing Solidarity.

However, Bong does have specific experience that makes his stories about capitalism and class so compelling, so jolting: ‘Korean filmmaking feels prescient today because of its own, recent entanglements with authoritarianism and poverty’ (Jung, 2019). Korea’s recent and specific history with authoritarian capitalism means that there is a developed vocabulary surrounding class: ‘*minjung* is a word for that class of people whose circumstances don’t markedly improve even through radical political change’ (Sellar, 2015). The characters in *Snowpiercer* and *Parasite*, while experiencing wildly different lives, all struggle within one capitalist system, blind to any solidarity alternative in the scrabble to come out on top. His films depict an awakening of class consciousness, a jolt to the *minjung*—the oppressed, who have untapped resources of power within them—still exist, and remain oppressed (Sellar, 2015). His films jolt the audience too - is this what life could come to? ‘*Parasite*, in particular, hits a nerve, tapping into the persistent feeling that we are on the brink of social collapse’ (Jung, 2019). Surely, there is another way.

While *Parasite* is moreso a jolting criticism of capitalism's vicious cycles, and a warning about what its continued survival could mean. *Snowpiercer* is the film that offers an alternative, however vague. *Snowpiercer*'s Curtis, once he has fought his way up to the Front Section, is invited to drive the train (Fig. 2). While the material comfort and stability tempts him, he instead upends the entire system that the train relies on - instead of going up and down, he goes out, sideways. He destroys the train, and therein, the system.



Fig. 2: Curtis is invited for a meal with the engine driver.

The train must be stopped because humanity cannot continue in the cruel cycles of the past. Capitalism's likening to an engine in *Snowpiercer* is apt, as Arundhati Roy uses the same metaphor in her book *AZADI*. 'The engine lasts forever but not so all of its parts' (*Snowpiercer*, 2013) - capitalism is inherently self-destructive, even 'suicidal' (Chomsky, 2021, p.239). She states that the occurrence of the Covid-19 pandemic could be advantageous in terms of creating a new world:

'...this virus... struck hardest - thus far- in the richest, most powerful nations of the world, bringing the engine of capitalism to a juddering halt. Temporarily

perhaps, but at least long enough for us to examine its parts, make an assessment, and decide whether we want to help fix it, or look for a better engine' (2020, p.204).

There is a clue, in *Snowpiercer*, about how this class awakening could be manifested and utilised. Towards the end of the film, as Curtis describes the early days of life on the train, as those in the Tail Section struggled to survive, turning to murder and cannibalism. This inter-class squabbling is detailed in *Parasite*, where the two families living beneath the Parks sell each other out, leading to their ultimate failure to achieve a better life. In *Snowpiercer*, however, we skip ahead, beyond this, to solidarity. Curtis recounts that one passenger, to save a baby, offered his arm and 'all of a sudden, we became human again. One by one, people began to follow his example, offering their arm or their leg. It was some kind of a miracle' (*Snowpiercer*, 2013). Compassion drives change, just as indifference welcomes us to continue a harmful cycle.

(iii) A Brief Interlude.

What must be acknowledged is the surpassing popularity of the films of both directors, even if their popularity was not intended: Miyazaki meant to convey an Anti-American sentiment in *Howl's Moving Castle*, which will be discussed later, but was greeted with an Oscar nomination, and Bong's Oscar wins for *Parasite* was met with his nonchalance. Brecht asserts that 'criticism of society is ultimately revolution; there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and playing an active part' (2016, p.172), but this was pre-neoliberalism. Fisher describes a much more canny system, where 'anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism' (2009, p.12). A film is entertainment, and clearly, as in the case of *Howl*, is rarely analysed by audiences, especially due to the concept of "interpassivity": the film performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity (Fisher, 2009, p.12). Certainly, this is crucial to our understanding of the real impact of film in our world, but through the discussion of these filmmakers, and their specific run-ins with authoritarianism and capitalism. Especially when they do not fall into the 'good vs. evil' trap' (Portello, 2014, p.2).

(iii) The Great Hayao Miyazaki.

(a) The Man Behind the Films.

Hayao Miyazaki is a co-founder of Studio Ghibli, an immensely popular Academy Award winning Japanese animation house. Miyazaki was born in Tokyo in 1941, and most of his early childhood was punctuated by World War II bombings (Markbreiter, 2018). These experiences followed him into his career; many of his films are overtly environmentalist, anti-war, and anti-authoritarian. And they are directly relevant to the most pressing issues today. Indeed, Chomsky lists our time's 'prime concerns':

‘nuclear war, environmental destruction, and deterioration of democracy, the last of these because the only hope of dealing with the two existential crises is vibrant democracy in which an informed population is directly engaged in determining the fate of the world’ (2020, p.240).

Miyazaki acknowledges this. Thus, ‘the greatest theme throughout Miyazaki’s work is the tension between capitalism and nature’ (Markbreiter, 2018), not only of the natural *world* but human nature. *Princess Mononoke* (1997), which is often regarded as Miyazaki’s darkest film, and *Howl’s Moving Castle* (2004) express these themes and offer clues and insights into an anti-capitalist future - and, how to get there.

(b) Systems, Reprised.

What is perhaps most notable about Miyazaki’s films, at least from a Western, Disney-centric standpoint, is that there is rarely a true villain, or even a villain at all, just like the films of Bong Joon-ho. This is because, ‘where Disney pitches its villains as the crux of a problem—removable and fixable—Ghibli makes it clear they are the

result of a system,' (Marlborough, 2017). It is not the individual who shoulders the blame but 'the oppressive system they act within' (Ward, 2020). *Howl's Moving Castle* follows the titular Howl in his titular moving castle as he navigates a war as a drafted wizard soldier. He meets Sophie, who guides us through the story, and guides him to his heart, in the end literally returning his heart to him. Several characters do bad things throughout the film. The Witch of the Waste curses Sophie with old age and refuses to repent, but it becomes clear that she is not inherently evil. She is drained of her magic and her antagonism at once, the monarchy having stripped her magic from her. Even Madame Suliman, potentially Miyazaki's most villainous villain, who turns wizards into monsters to fight for her country, seems trapped by the system; expressing a desire for Howl to 'replace' her, and gladly ending the war. Howl himself has to be pushed to take a stand against the war he hates.

Similarly, in *Princess Mononoke*, the apparent villains are merely acting out their parts in an exploitative system, unable to change the script. *Mononoke* follows Ashitaka, a prince bitten and infected by a rabid boar during its attack on his village. He must venture to the land from whence the boar came to discover the origins of the disease - hatred - which 'will cause [him] great pain and then kill' him (Princess Mononoke, 1997). Significantly, he goes West, where there is 'an evil at work' (Princess Mononoke, 1997). The source is in the struggle between Irontown, an industrial town, and the forest on which it encroaches. Lady Eboshi represents the town, industry. San, the wolf-girl and titular 'princess', represents the forest, nature. The two struggle violently until finally, Eboshi murders the God of the Forest the ultimate act of violence (Fig. 3). Ashitaka, who must 'see with eyes unclouded by hate' (Princess Mononoke, 1997), attempts to bridge their ideological divide, but

when neither party is wholly in the wrong, this proves difficult. Eboshi buys freedom for women forced into sex work, and provides a home for lepers where no one else will. A leper says to Ashitaka: ‘the world hates and fears us, but she took us in and washed our rotting flesh and bandaged us’ (Princess Mononoke, 1997). Her desire to mine the forest for resources is not her own, but the only option that her world has given her: ‘nonapocalyptic reality is simply not hospitable to [capitalist] ambitions’ (Klein, 2008, p.20). Likewise, San, can only do what she must to preserve her home, and her family. Ashitaka, from a world outside this system, is the only one who can perceive its violent inner mechanisms:

‘This is what hatred looks like. This is what it does when it catches hold of you. It’s eating me alive, and very soon now it will kill me! Fear and anger only make it grow faster’ (Princess Mononoke, 1997).

Through Princess Mononoke Miyazaki models how the deliverance of a shock can lead to the restructuring of a society, and that human compassion is integral to its becoming a moral and caring one. The characters of *Princess Mononoke* cannot take charge until the murder of the Forest God. Or, what Klein would describe as a shock: ‘a state of shock, by definition, is a moment when there is a gap between fast-moving events and the information that exists to explain them’ (2008, p.458), but *Mononoke*’s characters do not flounder. They work together. They plan to rebuild, and, San and Ashitaka know how to build a better town, a better world:

“The Great Forest Spirit is dead now.”

“Never. He’s life itself. He’s not dead, San. He’s here right now, trying to tell us something, that it’s time for us both to live” (Princess Mononoke, 1997).



Figure 3: Lady Eboshi aims for the Great Forest God's head.

(c) Anti-War Ideology.

'Miyazaki wrote in a piece for *Neppu* magazine that he "had a strong feeling in [his] childhood that [Japan] had 'fought a truly stupid war'" (Armitage, 2013). This anti-war sentiment continued throughout his life, and into his career. When *Spirited Away* (2001) won an Academy Award, Miyazaki 'never showed up to receive his Oscar in protest of the Iraq War' which had been catalysed in the 9/11 attack of 2001 (Baume, 2018). *Howl's Moving Castle* was his next film, and further criticised the Iraq war. Additionally, *Howl* offered a beautiful, moving story with complex characters, and:

'Without a story, we are, as many of us were after September 11, intensely vulnerable to those people who are ready to take advantage of the chaos of their own ends. As soon as we have a new narrative that offers a perspective on the shocking events, we become reoriented and the world begins to make sense again' (Klein, 2008, p.458).

The war in *Howl's Moving Castle* is described as 'pointless', but throughout the film it becomes clear that any and all war is pointless (Howl's Moving Castle, 2004): 'while ...aimed... at the Iraq War specifically, through the use of a fantastical setting the

work becomes equally concerned with war in general' (Griffin, 2020). Where *Mononoke's* excessive violence is used as a tool to deliver its message, *Howl's* violence is its message. There is no justification for this level of violence, which is communicated when Sophie asks 'Is [the battleship] the enemy's or one of ours?', and Howl replies: 'What difference does it make?' (*Howl's Moving Castle*, 2004). They are murderers, regardless. The asinine cause of the war is addressed only once, and 'at the film's conclusion when the conflict is ended in a manner that is both flippant and arbitrary' (Griffin, 2020). Instead, the film addresses how people are affected: by the bombs which 'fall on civilian homes'; by having to fight;

'hack wizards, who turned themselves into monsters for the king. Those wizards are going to regret doing that. They'll never change back into humans. After the war, they won't recall they ever were human' (*Howl's Moving Castle*, 2004),

And by propaganda: 'only idiots believe what they read in the paper', Howl says (*Howl's Moving Castle*, 2004).

Throughout the film is the acknowledgement that human greed has driven this war, just as human greed and fear drove the Iraq war which this film criticises. In this film Miyazaki emphasises that violence perpetrated for purposes of greed cannot be undone. Once violent exploitation has been accomplished the damage to people and nature alike is irreversible. The Witch of the Wastes, who cursed Sophie, and is the first antagonist of the film: 'fell prey to a demon of greed, who slowly consumed her body and soul' (*Howl's Moving Castle*, 2004). Madame Suliman, the second antagonist, desires all of the wizards' magic for herself, under her control. But what is done through greed is permanent. The Witch cursed Sophie because she wanted Howl for herself, but she could not undo the curse: 'my talent lies in casting spells, not breaking them'. The wizards drafted by Suliman cannot 'change back into

humans'. The lives, homes, and places destroyed by bombs cannot be reclaimed. Violence cannot be undone: towards people and nature alike.

(d) Miyazaki's Environmentalism.

Miyazaki, grew up seeing 'how pressure to repair postwar Japan blindsided the environment,' all in the 'name of economic progress' (Markbreiter, 2018). This is the 'suicidal logic of unregulated capitalism' (Chomsky, 2020, p.239). *Mononoke* and *Howl* both represent aggression and disregard towards nature. In *Mononoke*, it is driven by a desire for resources and thereby profit; in *Howl* it is merely the collateral damage of war. These instances of violence towards our environment are depicted as abhorrent and innately unhuman. Not only this, but the level of violence against 'organised human life' is unprecedented, 'entirely new', and 'indeed unique in human history, and is a true existential crisis' (Chomsky, 2020, p.157).

'Yet environmental catastrophe features in late capitalist culture only as a kind of simulacra, its real implications for capitalism too traumatic to be assimilated into the system. The significance of Green critiques is that they suggest that, far from being the only viable political-economic system, capitalism is in fact primed to destroy the entire human environment' (Fisher, 2009, p.18).

The climate crisis is the greatest threat not only to human life but perhaps to capitalism itself; its critique draws attention to capitalism's weakness. The central issue of *Mononoke* is capitalism's 'suicidal' desire to exploit the natural world. Eboshi wants to kill the 'very heart of the forest' (Princess Mononoke, 1997), which is literally depicted as a God, a deer, who gives its creatures sentience, because:

'Without that ancient god the animals here would be nothing but dumb beasts once more. When the forest has been cleared and the wolves wiped out, this

desolate place will be the richest land in the world' (Princess Mononoke, 1997).

In *Howl*, the destruction of the natural world is less intentional, but it is still treated with contention - the countryside is known as the 'Wastes', because there is nothing to be mined, or exploited there, merely wizards and cursed old women. The characters still appreciate their beauty, and to the viewer there is a stark contrast between the hills and 'Star Lake' and the bombed towns where Howl fights the war, directly juxtaposed when 'a field of flowers [is] overshadowed by ugly instruments of destruction' (Baume, 2018). In *Mononoke*, however, nature fights back, following the logic that 'if we kill the humans, we will save the forest' (Princess Mononoke, 1997).

'Humanity's self-centred myopia – of only being able to see the backlash of the natural world, and not the human violence that triggered it – is what ultimately becomes the villain of the film' (Wang, 2017).

Nonetheless, Miyazaki is not entirely pessimistic about our relationship with the environment. *Howl's* titular structure, the moving castle, 'represents a blending of nature and tech, representing a healthy harmony rather than a full rejection of either' (Baume, 2018). More than that, the characters are moved by love for each other to imagine and create better worlds. 'The Thatcherite dictum that "there is no society", only atomised individuals' is destroyed in Miyazaki's films (Chomsky, 2020, p.191). *Howl's* characters become 'a family'; they are driven to create a better world for each other:

'Sorry, I've had enough of running away, Sophie. And now, I've got something I wanna protect. It's you' (*Howl's Moving Castle*, 2004).

In *Mononoke*, San and Ashitaka act as a bridge between the natural and human worlds, and their dedication to doing their best for one another inspires the Eboshi:

'We're going to start all over again. This time we'll build a better town' (Princess Mononoke, 1997). Miyazaki shows us that human connection is the only path away from crisis, from war, from exploitative, 'suicidal', capitalism:

'To give us back belief in the world - this is the power of modern cinema... in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world*' (Rodowick, 2010, p.111).

(e) Conclusion: The Importance of Breathing.

Miyazaki's respect for all life - human, animal, plant - echoes through every choice made in his films.

'Work and life become inseparable. Capital follows you when you dream. Time ceases to be linear, becomes chaotic, broken down into punctiform divisions. As production and distribution are restructured, so are nervous systems' (Fisher, 2009, pg. 34).

His films feature this type of work too; the four day shifts the women in *Mononoke* work, Sophie's refusal or maybe inability to separate herself from her job. Miyazaki reflects life, but with small clues as to what can be done to affect change. The intentionally slow pacing of films allows the character and spectator alike to stop, rest, and take time - inherently resisting and refusing post-Fordist neoliberal capitalism. This is due to the presence of the Japanese 'ma'.

'He clapped his hands three or four times. "The time in between my clapping is ma. 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. If you just have constant tension at 80 degrees all the time you just get numb"' (Ebert, 2002).

It is present when Sophie admires the lake (Fig. 4), in *Howl*, and it is there in *Mononoke*, when the wind swishes through the forests and the kodama bobble their heads. It could be argued that 'ma' is integral to Howl's character, too: 'His heart was stolen by a demon, he never returned to complete his apprenticeship, and from that day forward, he has been using his magic for entirely selfish reasons' (Howl's Moving Castle, 2004). He is moved by beauty alone, and embraces idleness; he rejects productivity entirely. He is revolutionary in the world of capitalist realism, even if it seems vapid. It is the all-encompassing nature of Miyazaki's ideology that is so convincing. Individuals are not at fault, the systems that create them are; war is a byproduct of the capitalist nurturing of human greed alone and can be stopped; we

are as responsible for nature as we are ourselves; time and human life is for enjoying, not constant productivity. Ultimately:

‘They strike that heady balance between unknowable dreaming and unkempt imagination. And buried within the grandeur of these cartoon fables is a thrumming advocacy for kindness, understanding, and the path to both: Resistance’ (Marlborough, 2017).

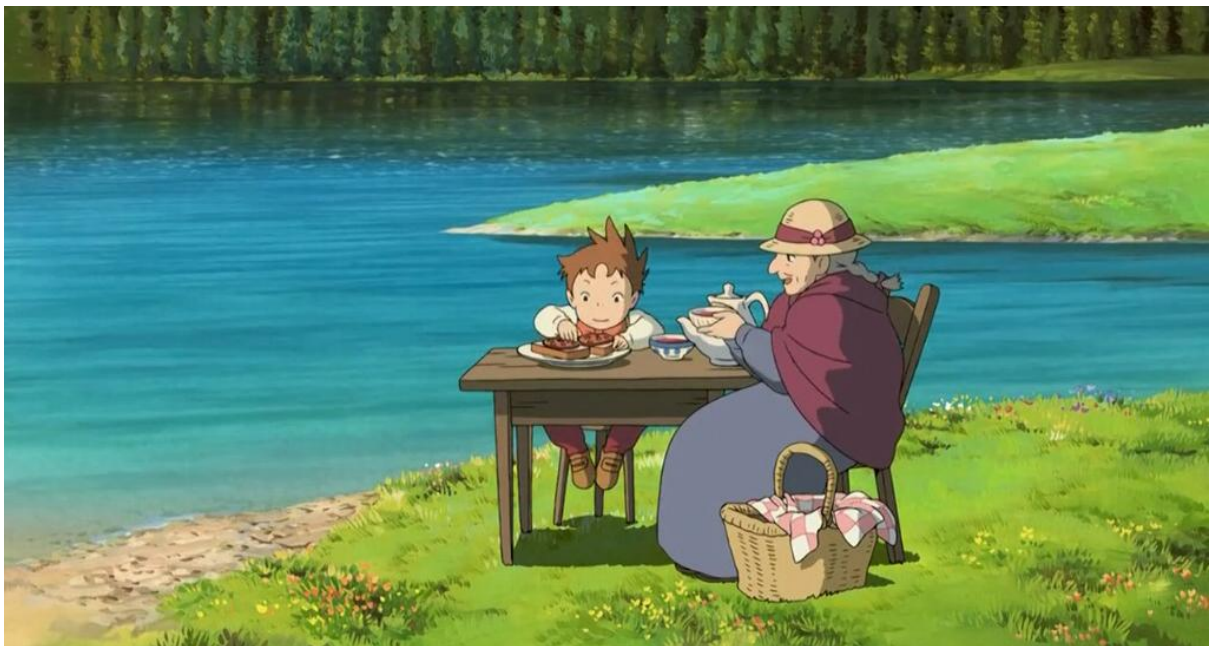


Figure 4: Sophie enjoys the peace and quiet.

Chapter Three.

(i) What Now?

We have indeed 'journeyed to a place from which it looks unlikely that we can return, at least not without some kind of serious rupture from the past' (Roy, 2020, p.1). Even at the time of Miyazaki's *Mononoke* and *Howl*, it was clear that something would have to give. Now, in the time of mass disillusionment, coronavirus, and a visceral thirst for change, something could give. Here were clues from filmmakers who have learned firsthand what exploitation and indifference can do, as to what could change in our world to create a circumstance where this level of cruelty is impossible, where people are the centre, not capital. Fisher insists that 'anti-capitalism must oppose Capital's globalism with its own, authentic, universality' (Fisher, 2009, p.79), and it is clear that every aspect of the films of Bong Joon-ho and Hayao Miyazaki opposes global capitalism.

(ii) The Power of Stories.

There is power in stories; Monbiot writes that 'those who tell the stories run the world' (2017), for 'fact and fiction are not converse. One is not necessarily truer than the other, more factual than the other, or more real than the other' (Roy, 2020, p.79). And stories, films, have power, can affect change, because of 'the murderous capacity of images, murderers of the real' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.10). Indeed, 'the story of our competitive, self-maximising nature has been told so often and with such persuasive power that we have accepted it as an account of who we really are' (Monbiot, 2017). Stories can become truth. Fact can become fiction. '...Recollections can be rebuilt, new narratives can be created' (Klein, 2008, p.463). And because

humanity needs a 'visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them' (Baudrillard, 1983, p.19), it is our responsibility to create stories that tell us that we are caring, that we are compassionate, that we can create a better world.

'The narrative we build has to be simple and intelligible. If it is to transform our politics, it should appeal to as many people as possible, crossing traditional political lines. It should resonate with deep needs and desires. It should explain the mess we are in and the means by which we might escape it' (Monbiot, 2017).

The films of Bong and Miyazaki are intelligible, appealing, and universal. While some veer into pessimism, like *Parasite* and *Princess Mononoke*, they do offer a means of escaping our dystopian reality. They offer us worlds in which we can believe, as Deleuze asserted was imperative (Rodowick, 2010, p.111), and worlds that, moreso in the case of Miyazaki, are *beautiful*, although the stark, pure snow, of a world unpolluted and full of possibility at the end of *Snowpiercer* is viscerally appealing (Fig. 5). As Roy writes: 'that beauty is on our side' (2020, p.202).

Of course, there is always more to be done, and conversations surrounding and provoked by these films are essential. Sholette proposes

'that the next step after shocking the viewer is engaging in participatory conversation about the shortcomings of existing social conditions. The resulting dialogical aesthetic aims to reimagine art and society as a more democratic collaborative project' (2017, p.142).

The desire for change has been clearly established. Critical engagement is imperative to this desire. And while we know 'there is no short-term process' (Meinhof, 2001, p.274), just one step forward is the right way to start (funnily enough, this is how *Snowpiercer* ends). While Chomsky indicates broadly to 'honest, dedicated, courageous, and persistent engagement, ranging from education and

organisation to direct activism, carefully honed for effectiveness under prevailing circumstances' (2021, p.73); Fisher recommends 'dreamwork' (2009, p.60); Roy, 'reimagining' 6. It is clear that, if little else, creativity and feeling is integral to establishing a new world order. So; to deliver a 'jolt', 'to give us back belief in the world - this is the power of modern cinema' because *we need reasons to believe in this world* (Rodowick, 2010, p.111). And once we believe, anything is possible.



Figure 5: The survivors of the train explosion take the first steps into a landscape full of possibility.

Conclusion: The End!

This essay found that capitalism is out of favour. It investigated the current social climate, finding that there is a great thirst for change. Through the examination of two different directors, Bong Joon-ho and Hayao Miyazaki, and their respective films and messages, suggestions for a new reality were made. It was acknowledged that film can be consumed passively, and that this poses a danger to social change.

However, this essay suggested that stories have power, and that if enough individuals were moved to empathy and compassion, and to take charge of their narratives, these films could catalyse and even affect real, tangible change.

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