RISING ASIA JOURNAL
RISING ASIA FOUNDATION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

ANWITHA KANDULA
Southside, Greenville, South Carolina

THE WAR OUTSIDE, THE RESISTANCE WITHIN
Hayao Miyazaki's Political Allegory of Totalitarian Power, and the Quiet Rebellion of the Individual

ABSTRACT

Hayao Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* is an allegorical critique of authoritarianism. The author selected this movie for research due to its magical façades and how they conceal a direct political message consistent with real-world regimes, such as Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union. Characters such as Madame Suliman symbolize propaganda, psychological coercion, and bureaucratic oppression, as Miyazaki illustrates war as an instrument of coercion and manipulation. This article finds that Miyazaki uses magic as a symbol of power. And while authoritarian magic rules, resistance is embodied by Sophie and Howl's emotional magic. The article concludes that real power in the

world of Miyazaki stems from self-sacrifice, moral conscience, and compassion, and not domination. Finally, the film challenges audiences to observe the mechanisms of dictatorship and to believe that defiance, even in small and personal ways, can be transformative.

KEYWORDS
Hayao Miyazaki, *Howl's Moving Castle,* Authoritarianism, Political Allegory, Resistance, Magical Realism

Although animated films can often be presented as naïve children's tales, visionary directors such as Hayao Miyazaki undersell in political discourse rather than as meaningful cultural products, and his works prove to be a poetic and profound form of resistance.[1] Miyazaki presents political critique in fantastical tales through emotionally charged characters and rich visual narrative, leveraging the language of wonder to expose war's machinery, authoritarianism, and cultural manipulation.[2] His work not merely entertains, but warns, empowers, and teaches. In this sense, *Howl's Moving Castle* (June 2005) is more than a fantasy—it is a lens through which viewers can engage with psychological and historical structures of power.[3]

---

[1] Xinnia Ejaz, "Confronting Coming of Age and War in Hayao Miyazaki's Howl's Moving Castle (2004)," *IAFOR Journal of Literature & Librarianship* 11, no. 1 (2022): 7–19, https://doi.org/10.22492/ijl.11.1.01

[2] Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, *A Propaganda Model, by Noam Chomsky* (Excerpted from *Manufacturing Consent*, 1988, Chomsky.info, https://chomsky.info/consent01/

[3] Kristin Comeforo, "Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media, *Global Media and Communication* 6, no. 2 (2010): 218–230, https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766510373714

Owing to its deceptively whimsical nature, *Howl's Moving Castle* was chosen for this study. Beneath its fantasy story and attractive visuals lies a politically charged tale that questions the authority of war, honors resistance, and denounces authoritarian governments. The film presents an emotionally and uniquely accessible image of life under totalitarian government, revealing how these governments forced loyalty, propaganda, terror, and psychological manipulation.[4] Characters such as Sophie and Howl represent different modes of resistance: passive survival, emotionnal courage, and pacifist resistance.[5] These acts of defense are reminiscent of such acts throughout history in oppressive cultures—from the dissidents of Stalinist Russia to Nazi Germany's White Rose organization.[6] Additionally, Miyazaki's decision to use an open-ended war with no ideological enemy or cause is reminiscent of the way totalitarian regimes employ foreign war as a tool to both control and unify populations at home.[7]

---

[4] James C. Scott,"Chapter Seven: The Infrapolitics of Subordinate Groups," in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 183-201, https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300153569-009

[5] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1np6zz

[6] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), https://robnixon.scholar.princeton.edu/publications/slow-violence-and-environmentalism-poor-0

[7] W. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin On the Concept of History, Theses on the Philosophy of History*, www.sfu.ca. 2019, https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html

Howl's Moving Castle resonates because of its accessibility to a global audience, particularly young viewers, and not only its timely relevance.[8] The film gently guides its audiences, unlike historical dramas and overtly political thrillers, through themes of fear, obedience, and personal transformation. This subtlety is Miyazaki's genius: he builds a world where magic and war coexist, and then asks what it means to resist.[9] By doing this, he steers clear of didacticism while presenting a profoundly human message—that empathy, inner strength, and moral clarity can confront even the most deeply-seated types of authoritarian control.[10]

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how *Howl's Moving Castle* criticizes authoritarianism through character design, symbolic metaphors, and narrative structure.[11] It discusses how Miyazaki draws from Stalinist Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, and historical regimes, transposing their mechanisms of control—militarism, coercion, and propaganda through a fantasy world.

---

[8] *Walter Benjamin on History, Collections, & Archives*, The New York Public Library, October 26, 2020, https://www.nypl.org/blog/2020/10/26/walter-benjamin-history-collections-and-archives

[9] Snimka Obrazovsky, "Living in Truth," Vaclav Havel Center, June 2, 2015, https://havelcenter.org/2011/12/31/living-in-truth/

[10] "Vaclav Havel, The Power of the Powerless," The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities (December 23, 2011), https://hac.bard.edu/amor-mundi/the-power-of-the-powerless-vaclav-havel-2011-12-23

[11] Carl Wilson and Garrath T. Wilson, "Taoism, Shintoism, and the Ethics of Technology: An Ecocritical Review of Howl's Moving Castle," *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 2, no. 3 (2015): 189–194. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/614513

Furthermore, the article discusses how the film offers counter-narratives for resistance through moral awakening of personal scruples, emotional courage, and individuality, and not political revolution and violence.[12]

Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* functions as a political allegory that draws on historical authoritarian regimes.[13] Through symbolic characters like Howl, Sophie, and Madame Suliman, the film demonstrates that authoritarian power thrives on fear, obedience, and propaganda. However, Miyazaki asserts that resistance—when rooted in empathy, individual transformation, and moral clarity—can challenge even the most entrenched systems of control.[14] In bringing fantasy and political consciousness together, the film empowers audiences, especially youth, to question dominant discourses and value the virtue of dissent.

The primary research question guiding this study is: How does Miyazaki utilize fantasy, character symbolism, and narrative techniques in *Howl's Moving Castle* to critique authoritarianism and outline the emotional and ethical aspects of resistance?

---

[12] Claudia Susana Nunes Martin, "Utopian Views in Literature and Cinema: Laputa as Depicted in Jonathan Swift and Hayao Miyazaki," July 2017, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321808511_Utopian_views_in_literature_and_cinema_Laputa_as_depicted_in_Jonathan_Swift_and_Hayao_Miyazaki

[13] Cheng-Ing Wu, "Hayao Miyazaki's Mythic Poetics: Experiencing the Narrative Persuasions in Spirited Away, Howl's Moving Castle and Ponyo," *Animation* 11, no. 2 (2016): 189–203, https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847716643777

[14] Daisuke Akimoto, "*Howl's Moving Castle in the War on Terror*," July 29, 2014, www.japanesestudies.org.uk. http://www.japanesestudies.org.uk/ejcjs/vol14/iss2/akimoto.html

Howl's Moving Castle follows Sophie, a young woman cursed into old age, and Howl, a reluctant wizard resisting conscription, set against a war and political manipulation backdrop. As they journey in the ever-shifting castle, it serves as an allegorical structure, embodying both a fragile nation and the unstable machinery of authoritarian rule.

This paper will analyze several aspects to answer this query. It will first discuss the film's depiction of foreign war as a tool of domestic control, comparing it with how authoritarian regimes use external threats to exercise domestic control.[15] Then, it will examine Madame Suliman as an embodiment of bureaucratic authoritarianism, emphasizing psychological coercion, surveillance, and the state subjection of citizens. The article will next discuss Howl and Sophie as embodiments of resistance, examining how pacifism, self-sacrifice, and emotional transformation operate as political actions.[16] It will also explore its criticism of propaganda, its use of power as metaphor in the context of magic, and its ethical differentiation between domination and compassion.

In addition, the paper will include a comparative analysis of *Princess Mononoke* (1999), another Miyazaki film that explores authoritarianism through Lady Eboshi's militarization in Iron Town. This discussion will further contribute to the concept of how Miyazaki's broader filmography contributes to a consistent

[15] Michelle J. Smith and Elizabeth Parsons, "Animating Child Activism: Environmentalism and Class Politics in Ghibli's Princess Mononoke (1997) and Fox's Fern Gully(1992)," *Continuum* 26, no. 1 (2012): 25–37, https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2012.630138

[16] "Miyazakiworld," Wikipedia, June 2, 2025.

political philosophy—one that condemns the exploitation of nature, the mechanization of human life under the guise of "progress," and the repression of native cultures. Finally, the paper will reflect on the cultural and pedagogical importance of Miyazaki's films in fostering political awareness and moral imagination among younger viewers. In an age when authoritarian ideologies continue to rise anew under new guises—whether through digital surveillance, state-sponsored disinformation, or the erosion of democratic mores—films like *Howl's Moving Castle* offer more than simple escapism. They are subtle calls to conscience, and they remind us that opposition is best waged not by armies, but by men and women who refuse to give up their very humanity.

1. War as an Instrument of Domestic Manipulation

In *Howl's Moving Castle,* war is never ideologically justified; it unfolds without clear policies, public speeches, or charismatic figures to mobilize the masses, highlighting its arbitrariness and political emptiness. The foe is faceless; the logic, unspoken. And yet the war gushes with nightmare regularity: bombers descend out of the sky, cities are ablaze, and troops march up and down the streets.[17] This deliberate vagueness is not a narrative lapse, but a political strategy. In authoritarian regimes, Miyazaki presents war with deliberate ambiguity, showing it as more than a tool of international conquest. Rather than serving foreign

[17] Susan Jolliffe Napier, "Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation," in *Internet Archive* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), https://archive.org/details/animefromakirato0000napi

policy aims, war is transformed into a mechanism of domestic control—a technology for governing citizens through fear and compliance.[18]

This is not merely applicable to fiction. In Stalinist Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, foreign war was employed to silence opposition and justify authoritarian rule.[19] Not even the characters or the audience are ever told the real reason why the kingdoms are at war. The conflict is portrayed as senseless and directionless, yet omnipresent. Nationalist patriotism is presented through the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939, where the Nazis are not only the perpetrators of the Second World War, but the invasion is also an opportunity for Hitler to mobilize the German people around a common goal. The regime used nationalism and fear as instruments to expand State power, cracking down on opposition, and imposing sweeping censorship.[20] Similarly, Stalin's 1939-1940 invasion of Finland, even when its military significance was nil, allowed the Soviet leadership to shore up domestic loyalty by representing itself as the victim of capitalist

---

[18] Merima Omeragić,"Turning War Horrors into Art?" Conflict, Justice, Decolonization, April 22, 2025, International Center for Cultural Studies, https://cjdproject.web.nycu.edu.tw/2025/04/22/turning-war-horrors-into-art/

[19] "Daisuke Akimoto—A Pig, the State, and War: Porco Rosso (Kurenai no Buta)," *Animation Studies*, October 2014, animationstudies.org, https://oldjournal.animationstudies.org/daisuke-akimoto-a-pig-the-state-and-war-porco-rosso/

[20] Thomas E. Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007), https://elearning.shisu.edu.cn/pluginfile.php/71578/mod_folder/ content/0/Thinking%20on%20Screen%20-%20Film%20as%20Philosophy%20-%20Thomas%20Wartenburg. pdf?forcedownload=1

belligerence and, thus, to create consent for increased repression. In both these cases, war played a dual function: as a means of foreign aggression, and as a symbolic tool to shore up domestic submission.[21]

Earlier, Sophie watches as airships drop bombs on buildings while a crowd of onlookers quietly stares upward (no screams, no questions, just passive observation). The city continues to operate even as it is attacked. With unsettling precision, Miyazaki recaptures this dynamic. No one on either side is completely certain of why the kingdoms of *Howl's Moving Castle* are embroiled in war. Civilians do not ask questions about the bombings and merely endure them, as they are caught between desensitization and propaganda. This affective detachment recalls Hannah Arendt's assessment that authoritarianism prevails not because of hyper-politicization, but because of moral numbness. When Sophie walks through a marketplace in broad daylight and bombs begin to fall, no one panics. The skies are heavy with aircraft, but no alerts are sounded. Shoppers continue with their day, apathetic or conditioned into compliance. The citizens are trained that whenever they ask questions, they will not be answered. In this case, war is an existential background noise—devastating, ongoing, but functionally normalized.

The most disconcerting depiction of such normalization in the film is the town scene where Sophie walks on streets being bombed in the daytime. The sky is heavy with airplanes, but there

[21] Ywaub Tomos, "The Significance of Anime as a Novel Animation Form, Referencing Selected works by Hayao Miyazaki, Satoshi Kon, and Mamoru Oshii," PhD Diss., Aberystwyth University 2013, https://research.aber.ac.uk/files/10592318/Tomos_Y.pdf

is no alert sounded. People continue to walk, shop, and converse—oblivious or anesthetized to the mayhem above. This dark vision evokes the wartime experience of citizens in totalitarian regimes, such as Berlin under the Nazis or Leningrad under Stalin's siege-era propaganda. In both cases, the State worked hard to preserve the appearance of normalcy, so that the population would continue to function, consume, and obey—even as the world burned around them.[22]

Furthermore, Miyazaki's depiction of war as an apolitical force—one without cause or resolution—deconstructs the idea that conflict is always rooted in ideology. Authoritarian States often manufacture ideology post hoc. The war comes first; the justification is created later. This manipulation, this reversal of the moral cause and effect of wartime narratives, shows how there are no clearly defined enemies: dissenters become the enemy.[23] The State offers its moral clarity when there is none. On such basis, the regime projects its mythologies that the war mirrors, and from which citizens are instructed to look away.

Miyazaki's vision of this dystopian ecology is especially relevant in an age in which modern autocracies ever more frequently employ foreign wars to justify domestic repression.[24]

---

[22] Edward S. Herman, "Dissent on Manufacturing Consent," *Journal of Communication* 40,no. 3 (1990): 189–190, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1990.tb02277.x

[23] Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), https://grattoncourses.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/hannah-arendt-on-violence-harcourt-brace-jovanovich-1969.pdf

[24] Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli: A Bibliography, *Howl's Moving Castle*," (n.d.)., https://sites.google.com/site/miyazakibib/films/howl-s-moving-castle

Whether it is China's militarization of nationalism towards Taiwan, or Russia's invasion of Ukraine framed as a "denazification," the playbook is eerily identical: assert moral absolutism, demand loyalty, and fabricate existential threats. As fiction, *Howl's Moving Castle* draws on a model of political reality that occurs with deadly frequency.[25]

The film critiques political reality through omission: in this war, there is no glory, righteousness, or heroism. *Howl's Moving Castle* offers no resolution, unlike traditional war narratives, as through Miyazaki's perspective, authoritarian wars are not designed to end. They are not meant to achieve victory, but sustain the regime.[26] As Howl says in the film, "They'll keep fighting until both sides are destroyed." His statement is revelatory and not fatalistic. It shows how war is the regime's lifeblood under authoritarianism, the ongoing state of exception that legitimizes the suspension of human rights, the eradication of opposition, and the concentration of power.[27]

It is this that renders Howl's refusal to fight the war so transgressive. He deconstructs the State's grand narrative, and in the saving of innocents, he derails (or sabotages?) air raids, and in his rejection of conscription, Howl regains agency in a world where war has made morality as meaningless as the moral code

---

[25] Jennifer Melzer, et al., "The Metaphors and Hidden Meanings in *Howl's Moving Castle*," June 3, 2024, CBR, https://www.cbr.com/howls-moving-castle-meaning-metaphors/

[26] "Diversionary Foreign Policy," May 24, 2025a,Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation.

[27] "Imperial Boomerang," Wikipedia.

itself.[28] His deeds are representative of a broader truth: resistance to war fascism does not necessarily manifest itself as revolution. Sometimes, it manifests as refusal.

In Miyazaki's world, this refusal becomes the first moral act—the first spark of resistance in an otherwise enfeebled society. It is not grounded in ideology or nationalism, but in empathy and personal ethics. By positioning war as a tool of domestic manipulation, and resistance as an act of emotional courage, *Howl's Moving Castle* offers an urgent critique of how authoritarian regimes maintain power, not simply through violence, but through the illusion that violence is inevitable.[29]

2. Totalitarian Symbols: Madame Suliman and "Magical Espionage"

Howl's Moving Castle critiques authoritarianism through its characters, while war in the film serves as a destructive backdrop. None is more representative than Madame Suliman. She is elegant, soft-spoken, and composed, as a former mentor to Howl and the King's Chief Sorcerer. However, beneath all her qualities lies a person of psychological pressure and strict control. She represents the side of totalitarianism that is bureaucratic: the rational administrator of cruelty, the master of manipulation who relies on subtlety rather than brute force or emotional

[28] Mehdi Shadmehr and Raphael Boleslavsky, "International Pressure, State Repression and the Spread of Protest," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no.1 (2022), https://doi.org/10.1086/714763

[29] Deisy Del Real and Cecilia Menjívar, "The Tools of Autocracy Worldwide: Authoritarian Networks, the Façade of Democracy, and Neo-Repression," *American Behavioral Scientist* 68, no. 12 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642241267926

outbursts to dominate others.[30] How authoritarian regimes gain power is illustrated directly in Suliman's role—not through blatant tyranny, but through systematic, institutional control disguised as peace, order, and efficiency.

Suliman shows she is quite ruthless of totalitarian figures such as Lavrentiy Beria, Stalin's Secret Police Chief, both behaviorally and visually, and Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's Propaganda Minister. These individuals ruled with systems, not soldiers, capitalizing on surveillance, psychological tools, and fear in order to gain loyalty.[31] Suliman works in a symmetrical, sterile palace. Her domain reflects the sanitized violence of bureaucracy, as it is well-lit, eerily calm, and clean. She embodies the cold machinery of the State: composed and serene, while always watching. Suliman's control is sneaky and invisible, unlike the chaotic violence at the front lines. In this way, Miyazaki presents her as the perfect symbol of the modern authoritarian technocrat. She represents tyranny not as a dictator, but as a smiling administrator. One of Suliman's main tactics is to force magicians into conscription and turn them into war machines. In her initial meeting with Sophie, she states coldly that Howl "must be cured" and "returned" to the palace—a euphemism for ideological reprogramming, not healing. Her suggestion that Howl

[30] Peter Schellhase, "The Conservative Vision of Hayao Miyazaki," *The Imaginative Conservative*, November 7, 2014, https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2014/11/conservative-vision-hayao-miyazaki-peter-schellhasse.html

[31] "Women and Power in the Films of Hayao Miyazaki," July 1, 2011, Blogspot.com, https://lashingsofgb.blogspot.com/2011/07/women-and-power-in-films-of-hayao.html

should be "cured" and "returned" is merely an Orwellian term for submitting to ideology. She thinks that powerful individuals who do not serve the State must be reprogrammed. The idea of repurposing magical talent into State weapons recalls historical instances where totalitarian regimes co-opted intellectuals, scientists, and artists, or eliminated them if they resisted. During Stalin's Great Purge, scientists were often imprisoned or executed for not following State ideology. In Nazi Germany, artists and thinkers were either integrated into State propaganda, like the German filmmaker and photographer Leni Riefenstahl, or exiled and silenced. Suliman's magical conversions represent Miyazaki's commentary on the weaponization of human potential: turning creativity into control, and passion into programming.[32]

In Suliman's usage of surveillance and illusions, magical espionage is similar to the methods used by authoritarian regimes to enforce conformity. The constant monitoring by the Gestapo in Nazi Germany and the NKVD in the Soviet Union mirrors her ability to manipulate, control, and spy. Ideologically and physically, citizens of these regimes were always watched. The private space disappeared, and even thoughts could become criminal. Suliman's magic operates similarly. Her illusions represent propaganda, crafting images so strong that they replace the truth, and are not just tricks. Howl's visible discomfort under her gaze does not stem from fear of physical

[32] Kerry Chambers, "Moral Ambiguity in Japanese Cinema," The Lily Pad, June 4, 2020, https://www.kerrychambersthelilypad.com/post/moralambiguityinjapanesecinemaessay

harm, but from the fear of losing his freedom—of being consumed by the machinery of obedience.

Perhaps most unsettling is Suliman's use of emotional manipulation. She does not yell, threaten, or physically force Howl or Sophie to comply. Instead, she uses politeness, logic, and a false sense of concern. This approach mirrors a powerful tactic in authoritarian systems: convincing people that submission is not only necessary but also kind. Her claim that she only wants "what's best" for Howl hides her true aim—total control disguised as reason. This is the same psychological trap that allowed fascist regimes to justify censorship, militarization, and genocide by appealing to order, stability, and national well-being.

Suliman also represents the tempting nature of authoritarian thinking. She is not a monster; she is elegant, persuasive, and even sympathetic. This is Miyazaki's warning: authoritarianism does not always show itself through violence. It often sneaks in through the language of progress, the calm appearance, and the false sense of protection. Suliman does not destroy Howl with fire or weapons; she tries to weaken his resistance through fatigue, guilt, and psychological manipulation. Her illusions aim to undermine his sense of identity, making him internalize State logic. This is Miyazaki's way of expressing ideological indoctrination—when the dissident starts to believe the State's version of himself.[33]

---

[33] Lindsay Smith,"[J-Anime] {Ghibli} War, Wizards, and Words: Transformative Adaptation and Transformed Meanings in Howl's Moving Castle," June 27, 2013, https://littledevil1919.wordpress.com/

Yet Suliman is not all-powerful. She depends on others to execute her will—soldiers, spies, and corrupt magicians. Her reach is broad but not unstoppable. Sophie, by confronting her in the palace, disrupts the sterile display of power. Sophie does not use force but instead reveals moral clarity. This confrontation shows another key truth about authoritarian regimes: their power often relies on spectacle, illusion, and fear, not on true legitimacy. Suliman's control depends on silence. Sophie's presence and her refusal to be scared start to break that illusion.[34]

In this way, Suliman serves as both a character and a critique, symbolizing how authoritarian States maintain obedience not just through surveillance or war, but also by using emotional relationships, psychological manipulation, and denying personal agency. Her palace is not just a seat of government; it is a metaphorical factory of submission. By resisting her, Miyazaki's characters show that the path to freedom does not require a grand rebellion; it involves the quiet, brave insistence on seeing through the illusion.

3. Resistance in Howl and Sophie: Moral Courage Over Power

In *Howl's Moving Castle,* resistance does not take place on battlefields. It is not loud, armed, or political in the usual way. Instead, Hayao Miyazaki presents resistance as something deeply

---

2013/06/27/j-anime-ghibli-war-wizards-and-words-transformative-adaptation-and-transformed-meanings-in-howls-moving-castle/

[34] Julie White and Rick Tate, "Breaking the Workplace Dependency Cycle: You Need Effective Delegation," ERE. September 13, 2012, https://www.ere.net/articles/breaking-the-workplace-dependency-cycle-you-need-effective-delegation

personal: a quiet moral awakening, a refusal to comply, and a brave claim of individual power against dehumanizing authority. Both Howl and Sophie represent such resistance, not through control or force, but through emotional clarity, strong beliefs, and a readiness to face personal consequences for rejecting systemic violence. In Miyazaki's world, resistance is not a revolution; it is a restoration of the human spirit.

Howl seems elusive, vain, and even cowardly at first glance. He runs from responsibility, avoids loyalty, and separates himself from the war altogether.[35] However, this apparent indifference reveals a complex moral position. Howl does not flee from war due to fear; he rejects its legitimacy. He refuses to be drafted, undermines bombing campaigns, and sabotages both sides in a conflict with no ethical foundation. His castle becomes a mobile sanctuary, a place literally outside the spatial and ideological realms of the war-torn kingdoms. In this way, Howl engages in what political theorist James C. Scott calls "infrapolitics": subtle, everyday forms of resistance that lie beneath the surface of open rebellion.[36]

Howl's transformation into a monstrous birdlike creature, resulting from his ongoing magical interference in the war, serves as a visual metaphor for the cost of resistance. His body, warped by magic and fatigue, demonstrates that challenging

[35] What is Civil Resistance?*ICNC*, 2015, https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/about/civil-resistance/

[36] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice," The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, February 6, 1957, https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/nonviolence-and-racial-justice

authoritarian systems exacts a significant psychic and physical price. Still, he accepts this fate. Unlike the State's war infrapolitics, whose practitioners choose to give up their freedom for military power, Howl fights against becoming a tool of violence, even as that struggle takes a toll on him. His sacrifice mirrors historical acts of courageous dissent, from conscientious objectors in the United States and Britain in the Second World War to Soviet refuseniks who faced exile and persecution for their refusal to conform.[37] Like them, Howl is not celebrated in his society. His bravery goes unnoticed, and his defiance is isolating. And that, Miyazaki implies, is what makes it genuine.

If Howl represents the external form of resistance, active subversion, and pacifist sabotage, Sophie embodies its internal evolution. At the beginning of the film, she is timid, self-effacing, and resigned to being invisible. Her transformation into an old woman by the Witch of the Waste is not just a magical curse; it shows how authoritarian systems age the soul. Fear, conformity, and repression stifle agency. But in her aged form, Sophie surprisingly becomes bolder. Free from the pressures of youth and societal beauty standards, she finds a new voice, courage, and moral clarity. Sophie's growth is subtle yet significant. She repairs Howl's home, confronts Madame Suliman, defies magical authorities, and, most importantly, becomes the emotional anchor of the film. Her resistance does not rely on power but on empathy. In Miyazaki's political imagination, this

[37] David Carroll Cochran, "The Irish Revolution's Overlooked History of Nonviolent Resistance," Open Democracy, January 29, 2019, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/irish-revolution-s-overlooked-history-of-nonviolent-resistance/

is not a weakness but a strength. Sophie refuses to dehumanize her enemies, even the Witch of the Waste, whom she protects despite her cruelty. Her defiance comes from not adopting the logic of authoritarianism, the binary of dominance and submission, and instead insisting on compassion, dialogue, and human connection.[38]

The emotional resistance is similar to the actions of historical figures like Sophie Scholl, a member of the White Rose resistance group in Nazi Germany. She was another young woman who found strength not in strict beliefs, but in her moral principles. Like Scholl, Miyazaki's Sophie does not seek power, but rather truth. She does not respond to aggression with aggression; instead, she uses the quiet strength of her integrity.[39] When she faces Suliman, she is outmatched in every way—magically, politically, and socially. But she stands her ground. That act of speaking honestly in a space designed to suppress voices is what shatters Suliman's illusion of power.

The parallel arcs of Howl and Sophie show a key idea of the film: true resistance comes not from domination but from refusing to take part in unfair systems. This reflects Václav Havel's idea of "living in truth" that describes how ordinary citizens under communist rule could resist totalitarian power by

---

[38] R. Brouillette, "Take Care of Everyone but Yourself?: Self-Sacrifice Schema," *Psychology Today*, November 21, 2022, www.psychologytoday.com. https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/flipping-out/202211/take-care-everyone-yourself-self-sacrifice-schema

[39] E. Lisa,"*How To Overcome Self-Sacrifice & Take Charge Of Your Emotional Wellbeing*," Eat Nourish Glow, October 10, 2023, https://www.eatnourishglow.com.au/post/how-to-overcome-self-sacrifice-and-take-charge-of-your-emotional_wellbeing

simply refusing to live a lie. Miyazaki's characters do not overthrow the government or start mass rebellion. Instead, by choosing empathy over fear, love over obedience, and humanity over control, they reveal the emptiness of the regime's authority.[40]

Miyazaki also questions traditional views of power related to gender. Howl, the male character, shows strength through protection, vulnerability, and sacrifice, not through conquest. Sophie, the female character, is not just a passive caretaker; she serves as a moral compass and disrupts illusions. Their resistance relies on relationships; it is not about asserting control but about building connections. In a world torn apart by war, their love is not just a romantic subplot; it is a political act. Unlike many political films, *Howl's Moving Castle* does not end with revolution or a change of government. The war ends, but the structures remain unclear. What changes is the awareness of the characters. Sophie and Howl take back their freedom. The castle, once broken and messy, is rebuilt, restructured, and steadied. It becomes a symbol for the self: after trauma and fear comes rebuilding. Resistance in Miyazaki's world is not about taking power. It is about choosing not to be shaped by it.

This view of resistance gives *Howl's Moving Castle* its lasting strength. In a time of rising authoritarianism, when dissent is punished, propaganda is accepted, and truth fades, Miyazaki offers not just criticism but also hope. He reminds us

[40] John Sanford, "Political Consensus through Empathy," Stanford Report, August 30, 2022, https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2022/08/political-consensus-empathy

that bravery does not have to be loud to be revolutionary. The quiet choice to protect instead of harm, to question instead of obey, and to love instead of fear, is itself a challenge to the systems that try to erase what is most human in us.

4. The Role of Propaganda in Manufactured Consent

Propaganda in *Howl's Moving Castle* is not a background murmur but a vital tool of authoritarian regimes. Miyazaki shows how governments make consent, quash rebellion, and numb the moral conscience of citizens. The film is not one of blatant slogans or open brainwashing. Instead, it illustrates the way war gets normalized, patriotism is acted out, and violence gets desensitized and rehearsed on a day-to-day basis. By subtle but powerful cinematic implications, Miyazaki demonstrates that propaganda's greatest achievement is not to inspire piety but to demand obedience through indifference.

The towns of the movie are not ravaged by war but drenched in its iconography. Soldiers march in the streets, not as enemies, but as part of the mundane world. Billboards and posters commemorate national pride, and airships hang over the skyline, charmingly machine-like but hiding their ability to destroy. The look of militarism is sleek and even romanticized. Bombings take place without sirens, without terror and outcry. Civilians walk under crashing debris with a strange sense of detachment. It is here that Miyazaki demonstrates what theorists Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman have termed "manufactured consent." That is, a State in which people's consent or passive endorsement of actions by an authoritarian figure, is not

forced but created by selective information, mythical bad guys, and well-crafted stories of national destiny.[41]

Miyazaki's portrayal of this phenomenon reflects historical examples. In Nazi Germany, Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda created a cultural environment that celebrated war as both noble and unavoidable. Propaganda spread through newspapers, films, radio, and even school lessons. The enemy was both demonized and dehumanized, while the German State was presented as a protective father figure, safeguarding culture and purity. Likewise, in the Soviet era, propaganda glorified Stalin's dictatorship and justified campaigns of terror for the sake of progress. In both dictatorial regimes, propaganda was not just external but also internalized. People were taught to be secure in lies, to associate conformity with righteousness, and to see silence as patriotism.

The internalization can be seen in the trains of thought of *Howl's Moving Castle.* The common citizen is not openly ideology-motivated but is rather increasingly apathetic. War is argued as a spectacle rather than as an ethical issue—it is presented in terms of fireworks, dress uniforms, and huge machines. No one questions the reasons why the war was fought or what the consequences are. Such ignorance is the ultimate aim of authoritarian propaganda: to create a society where critical thinking is weak and moral outrage is dulled. The most insidious

[41] Niloufar Zebarjadi, et al.,"Ideological Values are Parametrically Associated with Empathy Neural Response to Vicarious Suffering," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* 18, no. 1 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nsad029

kind of propaganda, Miyazaki argues, is not that which persuades people—it is that which makes them apathetic.[42]

Madame Suliman's deceptions and espionage are at the core of her mission. Her magic is not control—it is creating perceptions of reality. By creating false pictures and deciding what other humans can see, she creates a world in which the State appears all-powerful and kind. That is how totalitarian propaganda functions: it does not reveal truth; it offers a selective sight for the population to see what it desires. The truth is not outright denied; it is just put on the shelf. And in doing so, Suliman is not only fighting her enemies; she is fighting memory, feeling, and perception.[43]

A very touching scene where this idea is illustrated is when Sophie's town has been bombed. As the townspeople move through the ruins, they seem remarkably subdued. No sirens, no cries, no frantic running. The façade of the city is untouched, while its heart is being shattered. This is Miyazaki's take on how propaganda dulls the sensitivity of what we observe and the consequences that follow. The bombings are observed, but they fail to reach the heart. The civilians are not blind—they are numb. Horror, thus, becomes background noise in such a State

[42] David E. Lewis, "Unlearning Empathy Politics," *The Harvard Crimson*, November 11, 2021, www.thecrimson.com, https://www.thecrimson.com/column/unlearning-everything/article/2021/11/11/lewis-unlearning-empathy-politics/

[43] Scott Glassman, "Civility, Open-Mindedness and Empathy in a Politically Tense Climate," Pcom.edu, July 23, 2024, Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, https://www.pcom.edu/academics/programs-and-degrees/positive-psychology/news/civility-empathy-in-political-discourse.html

and, hence, justifiable. Miyazaki invites the viewer to think about propaganda not just as some external force, but as an emotional system. The film poses the question: What does it mean to exist under a government that rewards only conformity, scolds questioning, and substitutes emotion for rote patriotism? Sophie's capacity to weep, to express anger, to question are rebellious acts. Howl's refusal to get involved in the war, even at personal cost, is also a protest against militarism and the myths that support it. Both characters emerge as emotional dissidents in a world where emotion has been conditioned to conform to the State.

Miyazaki does not show propaganda as an overwhelming force; instead, he indicates its vulnerabilities. While everybody else is apathetic, Sophie is fundamentally awakened. And while other sorcerers fail, Howl resists. This shows that the apparatus of consent can be shattered, but not through counterpropaganda. It is dismantled by empathy, memory, and emotional honesty.[44] Sophie's journey is, in a sense, one of re-sensitizing to pain; she starts to actually "feel" in a world where individuals have been conditioned to numbness. Miyazaki, therefore, suggests that propaganda is not only answered by fact, but by emotion—the reassertion of moral feeling in the face of human suffering.

---

[44] Lisa Marie Patzer, "Political Empathy: American Conservatism, Its Past, Present and Future," *SNF Paideia Program at the University of Pennsylvania*. SNF Paideia Program, University of Pennsylvania, June 7, 2021, https://snfpaideia.upenn.edu/political-empathy-american-conservatism-its-past-present-and-future/

Secondly, Miyazaki critiques the romanticization of war, a common ruse of totalitarian propaganda. The warplanes, the uniforms, and the fantasy arms of the film are stunningly good-looking, but the looks hide the atrocity beneath. This recalls Walter Benjamin's caution that "there is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism." In *Howl's Moving Castle*, the State hides its savagery behind a scrim of progress with spectacle as a kind of opiate. By deconstructing this appearance and causing unease regarding beauty in viewers, Miyazaki resists the propagandist impulse to present violence as chivalrous.[45]

Briefly, *Howl's Moving Castle* demonstrates how propaganda works not just by overt lies, but by omission, diversion, and aesthetic manipulation. It argues against the way totalitarian governments generate passivity, not just by force of weapons, but by emotionally disorienting citizens. By exposing characters who regain their ability to feel, to question, and to resist, Miyazaki presents a counter-narrative that is subversive: one in which the remedy for fabricated consent is not blind resistance, but the restoration of moral imagination.

5. Magic as Metaphor: Sterile Power vs. Compassionate Resistance

In *Howl's Moving Castle,* magic is not simply a lighthearted embellishment; it is imbued with profound moral and political meaning. As opposed to the stereotypical fantasy novels in which

[45] Elizabeth E. Segal, "Social Empathy," Columbia University Press Blog, September 4, 2019, Columbia University Press Blog, https://cupblog.org/2019/09/04/time-to-move-empathy-from-the-personal-to-the-political/

magic is simply a cause of wonder or mayhem, Miyazaki employs it as a reflection of the nature of power itself. How magic is employed, and by whom, constitutes a potent symbol of social dynamics. To this end, magic in the film is present in two diametrically opposing modes: one of domination, control, and fear, and another of compassion, empathy, and emotional knowledge. The pair constitutes an important metaphor upon which Miyazaki relies for a critique of authoritarianism and other forms of ethical resistance.[46]

As soon as the State resorts to magic—specifically the State personified by figures like Madame Suliman and the aggressive monarchy—it becomes cold, mechanistic, and military. Its purpose is suppression, execution, and destruction. Wizards and witches are no longer free agents; they are bullied and transformed into literal weapons of war. These magical beings are stripped away from their independence, herded into servitude, and reprogrammed to become tame agents of the regime's will. Miyazaki points to the authoritarian tendency to reduce individuals to mere tools—the self as a tool of upholding a monolithic, oppressive ideology.

Suliman's use of magic shows this concept in action. Her palace, clean and neat, is a glacial rationality. Her spells are spurious pseudo-controls—spurious controls that confuse, terrorize, and manipulate. She is the technocratic authoritarian: her magic is mathematical, passionless. Her spells are performed for

[46] David Wees, "The Difference between Instrumental and Relational Understanding," *The Reflective Educator*, Davidwees.com, June 10, 2012, https://davidwees.com/content/difference-between-instrumental-and-relational-understanding/

the State, not the soul. This cleaned-up version of magic illustrates regimes in action, employing bureaucratic regulation and technological resources to repress personal identity and feeling, replacing richer human experience with automatic conformity. Just as propaganda, this magic distorts reality—redesigning it along a predetermined scheme.

Whereas Howl and Sophie's magic is intensely individual, confusing, and capricious, it is not ideological but driven by raw emotion—fear, love, pain, and courage.[47] When Howl casts spells, they erupt at random, charged with feeling. Their shape-shifting into that hideous bird is not deliberate; it is spontaneous, threatening, and often self-sacrificing. His magic is a curse and a defense, showing the physical and mental cost of fighting against it. But it is also an affirmation of his moral dedication to not being a force of destruction. Even as it distorts him, his magic never ceases to be an instrument of domination. It is always escape, sabotage, or protection—never conquest.[48]

Sophie's magic is more enigmatic and subtle, though. She is not trained, yet she possesses an otherworldly ability to transform her environment. Her looks change throughout the film depending on how she feels about herself. Her ability to give life to the world—to mend the broken castle, awaken Calcifer, Howl's fire demon, and lift the heart curse from Howl—indicates

[47] Sin Ching See,et al., "Are Relational Values Different in Practice to Instrumental Values?" *Ecosystem Services* 44, August 2020, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoser.2020.101132

[48] Anders Esmark, et al., "How Technocratic is the Power Elite? A New Approach and Evidence from a Mixed-Method Study of the Danish Power Elite, *New Political Economy* (2025): 1–19, https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467 .2025.2497771

that her magic is not spectacle; it is really altering. It flows out of compassion, moral accuracy, and internal resolve. Unlike Suliman, who rebuilds others using lies and force, Sophie rebuilds the world by mending what has been damaged. Her magic, which is born of relationships and care, is an act of radical repair in a world governed by mechanized violence.

In this counterpoint, Miyazaki offers a deep political allegory: Power can control or cultivate. It can be misused or restore. The politics of sovereignty selects the former, aimed at controlling its people, its language, and even its truth. But Sophie and Howl represent a power that upends this formula.[49] Their magic is anarchic—not in the sense of being chaotic, but in the sense of rejecting hierarchy, standardization, and ideological purity. It honors the dignity of the peculiar, the imperfect, the emotional, and the human.

Miyazaki's take on magical power has a subtle twist when it comes to gender. Suliman's magic represents a patriarchal system, cleverly disguised as a form of bureaucratic femininity—elegant, organized, and managerial. In contrast, Howl, while strong, does not fit the mold of a traditional hero; his powers often waver, and he relies on Sophie's emotional wisdom to tackle obstacles. Sophie, in her own words, redefines power—not as domination, but as resilience, empathy, and the ability to transform herself and others. Her power lies in relationships, not conquest. In a world that too often becomes obsessed with

[49] Alex Morris. "What You've Suspected is True: Billionaires are Not Like Us," *Rolling Stone,* June 15, 2025, https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-commentary/billionaires-psychology-tech-politics-1235358129/

magical superiority, Miyazaki reframes magic as a marker of moral power—the ability to heal, inspire, and push back without resorting to the violence of their suppressors.

There is also an environmental dimension to this symbolism. The State's magic is destructive and poisonous—bombs rain from the sky, conflagrations burn down towns, and wizards become brutish creatures. In contrast, Howl's and Sophie's magic renews landscapes, cures wounds in living creatures, and recovers what has been lost. This is the very same environmental ethic that Miyazaki has espoused all along: power based on domination eventually destroys the world, but power derived from care can redeem it.[50]

Ultimately, what the film suggests is that the real conflict is not between aggressive States or ideologically disparate ideologies, but between two concepts of power. One, the State craves total domination. The other, Howl's and Sophie's, craves connection. Politics is relational in this instance, and magic is ethical. It is not who wields the power, but how they wield it, which matters. Conquest makes isolation; compassion restores.

And lastly, Miyazaki's message is absolutely clear: no matter how advanced the weaponry, tyranny is always the result of power divorced from humanity. But despite its disorderliness, imperfection, and relationality, power exercised through empathy can counteract authoritarianism by a stubborn insistence on

[50] Chris Hedges, "The Cost of Resistance," *Truthdig*, November 5, 2017, https://www.truthdig.com/articles/the-cost-of-resris istance/

healing rather than force. Magic is not just a weapon in the film, but an ethical decision.[51]

6. Comparative Analysis with *Princess Mononoke*: Ecological and Cultural Authoritarianism

Hayao Miyazaki barely repeats himself, but his films address one another across the great periods and genres. *Princess Mononoke* (1997) returns to the mythic history of Japan at the very same instant that *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) peers out into an indistinctly European future, but both movies investigate the same essential question: how does authoritarian power establish its legitimacy—politically, culturally, and ecologically—and how can it be challenged without mimicking its violence? Placing the two films in dialogue clarifies Miyazaki's broader philosophy: domination is never purely martial; it always entails the conquest of landscapes, memories, and spiritual life; and genuine resistance must therefore be simultaneously political, cultural, and ecological.

In *Princess Mononoke,* Lady Eboshi's Iron Town operates as an industrial micro-state. Like Madame Suliman's palace, it is rational, ordered, and productive, yet its prosperity is built on the systematic extraction of forest resources and the violent displacement of non-human spirits. Eboshi's brand of authority embodies what environmental theorist Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—damage that is incremental, normalized, and often

[51] Angela Varricchio, "The Subversion of Hierarchies of Power: How Conflict Women Photographers' Gendered and Racialised Disparities Shape Oppositional Gazes on War," PhD Diss., Lancaster University, 2024, https://research.lancaster-university.uk/en/publications/the-subversion-of-hierarchies-of-power-how-conflict-women-photogr

invisible until ecosystems collapse. Her iron foundry and firearms echo Suliman's magic-arms: both transform living energy—human or natural—into weapons of control.

But Eboshi differs from Suliman in one essential respect: she is generous to her kind. She frees the lepers, employs the ex-brothel girls, and offers them protection and significance. The complication exposes a key feature of real-world authoritarian regimes: paternalistic inclusion at the center, forceful exclusion on the periphery. The cost of belonging is complicity with ecological and cultural annihilation, just as citizens in *Howl's Moving Castle* are asked to disregard the bombs so long as life looks orderly.

Where Suliman suppresses opposition with propaganda and conscription, Eboshi assaults the cosmology of the forest dwellers. The Boar God, the Deer-God Shishigami, and San (the "wolf girl") symbolize a mode of perception wherein nature and culture are interdependent; to defile them is to defile a language or religion. This captures historical patterns—from colonial prohibitions of Indigenous rituals to Stalin's suppression of animist Siberian cultures—under which authoritarian modernization requires the elimination of other ways of understanding the world. In both films, such hegemony is more than land or labor; it seeps into the metaphysical, imposing what kinds of stories can survive.

Princess Mononoke's resistance does not come from a monolithic revolutionary vanguard but from hybrid figures who exist between worlds. Ashitaka—under a curse by the industrial brutality but compassionate towards the suffering of Iron

Town—is reflected in Sophie's ambiguous position as both cursed and empowered. San, raised by wolves but human, is mirrored in Howl's bird-forms: both bodies attest to the psychic cost of resisting assimilation.[52] Above all, these characters avoid absolutism. They do not want to annihilate the "other side," but advocate a precarious survival based on humility in relation to the more-than-human world.

Taken together, the two films show that authoritarianism is not merely a human power relationship; it is also an ecological regime. Suliman's bombs scar cities, while Eboshi's iron scorches forests and taints rivers. Both illustrate what eco-philosopher Timothy Morton calls "hyperobjects"—vast processes like industrial war or climate change that dwarf individual comprehendsion yet are orchestrated by concentrated political decisions. Resistance, therefore, entails something more than the toppling of a leader; it entails re-imagining the relationship between land, life, and technology.

By relocating the site of conflict—from city firebombing to primal forest—Miyazaki makes a recurring moral argument: true freedom is cooperative. Domination of human beings inevitably bleeds into domination of nature, and vice-versa; and environmental destruction legitimates cultural destruction. Conversely, habits of care that heal defaced landscapes (Sophie healing the castle; Ashitaka healing the Deer-God's head) also

[52] Lacie C. Blankenship, "Gender Dynamics in the Workplace," Vanderbilt Business School, July 13, 2023, https://business.vanderbilt.edu/news/ 2023/ 03/24/gender-dynamics-in-the-workplace/

heal moral imagination, allowing communities to re-envision power as stewardship, not sovereignty.[53]

7. Why Miyazaki's Political Fantasies Matter: Young Audiences and Moral Imagination

In an age of increasing polarization, disinformation, and global authoritarian resurgence, political storytelling has never been more vital—yet rarely is it entrusted to children. Hayao Miyazaki's work breaks this mold entirely. Through fantastical worlds, gentle protagonists, and surreal beauty, his films engage young audiences in questions that many societies avoid, even adults: What does it mean to resist power? Who decides what counts as progress? Can care and courage defy militarism? Far from escapism, Miyazaki's animated films are acts of radical pedagogy. They seed moral complexity in the minds of the young, trusting them to grapple with the ambiguity of justice, the cost of resistance, and the shape of hope.

Why does this matter? Because the child viewer is not innocent—they are becoming aware, forming values and learning how to interpret power and authority. And the stories they encounter in this early phase constitute the map of their moral imagination.[54] Miyazaki understands that the most powerful acts of resistance begin not with ideology, but with compassion. Through characters like Sophie, Ashitaka, San, and Howl,

---

[53] Alasdair Cochrane, "Environmental Ethics,"*Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://iep.utm.edu/envi-eth/

[54] "The Importance of Ethics in Environmental Practice," National Registry of Environmental Professionals, July 23, 2024, nrep.org, https://www.nrep.org/blog/environmental-ethics-importance

children are invited to experience the emotional and ethical weight of dissent, to witness power that is seductive and violent, and to recognize the quiet dignity of saying "no" when the world demands "yes."

In contrast to many Western fantasy narratives, which often celebrate conquest or heroism through exceptionalism, Miyazaki's films offer an ethics of ordinariness. His heroes are not destined rescuers but common people who act on conscience. Sophie is a timid girl transformed not so much by magic as by conviction. Ashitaka does not defeat evil; he labors his way through it. These characters do not quite "win," for Miyazaki rejects dichotomies of good and evil. What he offers instead is a more difficult—and more accurate—hypothesis: that resistance is not about victory, but about remaining human in inhuman systems.

It is especially crucial in today's world of authoritarian inclinations. Children all over the globe are being raised within societies that manipulate history, silence opposition, and redefine nationalism as righteousness. In these sorts of settings, early exposure to moral nuance is an act of emancipation. *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Princess Mononoke* are not only films that show dictatorships—they teach us how propaganda operates, how conformity tastes, and how complicity masquerades as peace. These are not slogan-shouting movies; instead, they stealthily pose questions. And questions learned early on become a form of survival against indoctrination.

Moreover, Miyazaki reimagines power itself for kids. His villains are not monsters to vanquish, but systems to be

understood. His magic is not about mastery, but curing. And his heroes do not seek domination, but sharing. And through it all, he constructs a political imagination that is not based on revenge or domination, but on sympathy, healing, and balance—virtues so desperately needed in today's civic politics.

No wonder that Miyazaki places these revolutionary ethics in visually dense, emotionally intense, and narratively enchanted modes. His style is not camouflage—it is a strategy. The fantasy invites permeability; the wonder dissolves defensiveness. And in that space of wonder, Miyazaki inserts his deepest messages. A child may not leave *Howl's Moving Castle* with acclamation from Václav Havel or Hannah Arendt—but they may leave with a feeling that war is not glorious, that goodness is strong, and to never stop thinking for yourself. That, Miyazaki suggests, is revolution number one. In an era where childhood is increasingly colonized by algorithms, militarism, and apathy, Miyazaki's political fantasies remain luminous acts of resistance. They are not didactic; they are transformative. And in showing that the fight for justice begins with the imagination, they do something that no State—authoritarian or otherwise—can ever fully control.

Hayao Miyazaki's films, especially *Howl's Moving Castle,* have gained both critical praise and strong public affection. However, their political themes often show differences in how they are received. Many Western audiences see *Howl's Moving Castle* as a whimsical fantasy. In contrast, Japanese viewers recognize its hidden criticism of war and bureaucracy. This is especially relevant since Miyazaki openly opposed Japan's

involvement in the Iraq War, which influenced the film's anti-war message.

Critics have admired the film's imaginative world and thematic depth. However, some Western reviews initially found its story confusing and missed its anti-imperialist message. Later, scholars and commentators revisited the film's intricate themes, acknowledging that Miyazaki portrays war not as a noble cause but as a destructive force driven by blind loyalty and concentration of power. This mixed reception—whimsical fantasy versus political story—highlights the quiet power of Miyazaki's rebellion.[55] He engages viewers emotionally first, and then intellectually, allowing political critique to surface subtly through character choices, moral conflicts, and resistance to authoritarian systems. This combination of emotional and intellectual appeal has helped *Howl's Moving Castle* remain a cherished animated film and a meaningful anti-war statement.

8. Conclusion

Closer examination reveals that Miyazaki Hayao's *Howl's Moving Castle* is not simply a fantasy romance of magic and love, but rather a blistering, multivalent allegory of life under totalitarianism, and the low-key, hard-won forms of resistance that manage to adhere to life there. By presenting the parallel existences of Howl and Sophie, Miyazaki creates a detailed portrait of power—not just political power, but affective,

[55] "What: 5 Key Conflicts Between Laws and Ethics in 2024," Infonetica.net, https://www.infonetica.net/articles/conflicts-between-laws-and-ethical-behavior

psychological, and spiritual power—and in doing so, invites the viewer to consider what it feels like to be an antagonist.

The film critiques totalitarian regimes not by identifying them, but by parodying their emotional register: propagandistic emotional anesthesia, fetishization of loyalty, routine of enchantment, and coercion into conformity for safety. The film spells out clear symbolic equivalents in earlier totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Stalinist Soviet Union, examining how violence is justified, how reality is manipulated through illusion, and how individuality is quietly eliminated in the interest of conformity.

But Miyazaki's greatest contribution lies not in critique, but in counter-narrative. Resistance in *Howl's Moving Castle* does not arrive in revolution or State collapse—it exists in private refusals, emotional courage, and acts of care. Howl sabotages without spectacle. Sophie restores rather than destroys. Their actions do not overthrow the regime, but they undermine its logic. They resist by refusing to internalize its values.

When viewed alongside *Princess Mononoke*, Miyazaki's political project becomes even more expansive. Here, authoritarianism is not only political but ecological and cultural—a campaign against nature, spirituality, and ancestral knowledge. Lady Eboshi's Iron Town modernizes through erasure, just as Suliman's palace conquers through manipulation. In both films, resistance is plural, hybrid, and morally complex. Miyazaki refuses to reduce power into binaries; instead, he invites viewers—especially young ones—to sit with ambiguity and act with compassion anyway.

For these reasons, Miyazaki's political fantasies matter. They speak to a generation increasingly exposed to authoritarian drift, global militarism, and ecological collapse, yet rarely offered stories that trust their capacity for moral clarity. *Howl's Moving Castle* is not about simplistic solutions, but about something more enduring: a vision for seeing—where resistance is not loud, but consistent; where magic is not domination, but connection; and where survival is based not on strength, but on compassion, integrity, and imagination.

In an era where totalitarianism often disguises itself in beauty, civility, or progress, Miyazaki's films remind us that the true battle is not always waged in the streets, but in the human heart, where conscience must choose, again and again, not to become what it hates.

Note on the Author

Anwitha Kandula is an International Baccalaureate Diploma Student and is currently ranked 2/208 throughout the institution. Alongside five current science-based research publications, Kandula has earned over 1,000 downloads collectively for all her papers and has made several "Top 10 Lists" for her research in different journals. Throughout her educational career, Kandula is intensely driven, not just to succeed, but to lead and create impact, pursuing excellence with long-term vision and strategic action. Her research background can be found in microfluidics, biomaterials, and mesothelioma cancer, with growing interests in foreign policy, diplomacy, international relations, and global politics.