Miyazaki’s Film and Its Imaginary Ideals

Films, similar to texts and other types of media, are fascinating tools for conveying cultural ideals and reflect upon societal complications, in other words, what the masses care about and what directors aspire to raise awareness towards. Here I will look at Miyazaki’s animated films that reflect on compassion and anti-war themes, and how they are commodities that the Japanese people consumes. Additionally, I will argue the film helps to establish a national imagined community and that consumers of the films are subject to a state ideological. Specifically, I will draw examples from one of his film, Howl's Moving Castle as well as other summary statistics.1 I will examine aforementioned materials using perspectives from Anderson’s Imagined Community, Althusser’s Ideological State Aparatuses, and Marx’s The Fetishism of the Commodity. I will argue that Miyazaki’s films are commodities that satiates the craving for an idealized world of compassion and devotion and consumers of his films contribute to a national imagined community out of an appreciation of such values and ideals. Miyazaki’s films seek to revolt against the conflicting contemporary political dynamics and to reconcile with the audience of the aspirations that he holds for a romanticized world.

Miyazaki’s films, with its carefully crafted characters, contributes to the establishment of a national imagined community. As Anderson puts it, a finite group of people having a common and visceral imagining of a shared community and, as a result, is infused with a ‘deep, horizontal comradeship’ constitutes the defining characteristics of an imagined community. 2 Howl’s Moving Castle, an exemplar of Miyazaki’s film, is one of the medium that contributes to the national imagined community. When it was first released in 2004, the film became widely popular nation-wide, was nominated at several international film festivals, and ranked third as the highest-grossing animated films to date. Despite its world-wide critical acclaim, 80% of the revenue came from the Japanese audience alone, 3 giving rise to a clear and distinct boundary that separates its audiences and the rest. The popularity of the film in Japan is not surprising. Despite its fictional and Western-like setting, the personalities of characters are immediately familiar. As the young and able female protagonist of the film, Sophie confessed that she wanted to look after her father’s legacy, the hat shop, when asked the motivation for working as a hatter as opposed to other jobs. As foreign as the idea might sound, there is a strong sense of obligation and sacrifice to a group such as family in modern Japan and would be perhaps just natural for the audience to accept Sophie’s choices. 4 As another example, Sophie is empathetic and henceforth kind to others, a virtue that is part of the Japanese character. 4 She helped the scarecrow getting upright, replaced wood for the fire demon Calcifer, helped madam Suliman’s dog up the stairs, and even cared for the Witch of the Waste, who put Sophie under a curse in the first place. It is apparent that the film is conceived and made in such a way that the viewers can relate the story to a shared upbringing and consider Sophie’s virtues as at once an intimate reminder of a common desire towards the goodness of humanity. Conversely, familiarity reinforces itself. It is only natural to be agreeable with and admire Sophie as a person. In this end, the film reinforces the imagined community by establishing a role model with which the viewers feel connected to, and are inspired with a closeness to each other as a result. Not only do Miyazaki’s films contribute to the national imagined community, they indoctrinate the viewers in a state ideology.

Miyazaki’s film acts as an ideological state apparatus that encourages the masses to become compliant citizens. In Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses, Althusser introduces ideological state apparatuses (ISA) as a method used by the state to maintain control of the dominant class in ways that are typically subtle and non-coercive. Instead of explicit coercion and violence, the goal of ISA is to endow each subject an ideology, with which individuals genuinely believed in their ‘ideas’ such that their actions follow ‘freely’ afterwards. 5 Howl’s Moving Castle established Sophie as an optimistic, compassionate and brave citizen even in face of harsh conditions. After Sophie is turned into an old lady by a curse, she jokes about her still having teeth left to eat bread, accepting sudden adversaries with striking optimism. As we mentioned previously, it is in this condition that she remains compassionate and offer to help people around her, especially to Howl. She is brave enough to go the palace alone and confront Madam Sulliman whom Howl feared and embraced him wholeheartedly as Howl took form of a wounded beast. As she talks to Calcifer the fire demon, Sophie asserts that the best blaze burns brightest, when circumstances are at their worst.1 As another example, Howl, who started being fearful of death and evades conflicts, is able to defend others, sometimes even sacrificing himself as a consequence. The outcome for altruistic devotion under adverse conditions is a perfect ending, where most characters resolved their own conflicts and experienced personal growths. With respect to the perspective of the viewers, the subjects are unknowingly supplanted the consciousness that being empathetic, brave and optimistic is favorable and that acting accordingly would give rise to ideal outcomes. Although it can be argued that any film would be equally capable of conveying a moral with which the audiences might be encouraged to agree with, we can still argue that the film itself is an effective ideological state apparatus to a specific audience group. The audiences are infused with this important moral of the story, as it is recurrently manifested in multiple characters throughout the entire film. Another interesting observation come from the relentless reality of old-age that Sophie has to undergo. Despite being an old woman, she finds something meaningful to do by assuming the responsibility of a cleaning lady at Howl’s castle and rejoices at the cleaning work she has accomplished. This theme is particularly uplifting to certain viewers who are themselves in the same situation. Instead of bemoaning the physical conditions that everyone will eventually suffer from, they are instead encouraged to make best of themselves and collect a sense of achievement through it. Such lesson is not rare in Miyazaki’s films, protagaonist in Princess Mononoke and Castle in the Sky all learn the same lesson. Therefore, it is not surprising that the viewers operate within an ideological state apparatus of Miyazaki’s films. Devotion and sacrifice to others is a state ideology that propagates itself via the means of animated films. The message is then celebrating and promoting a virtue, embodied in an idealized fictional character. The state benefit from such particular publicized view of what is considered virtuous. The citizens are encouraged to adapt to social and economic hardships and still act as a compassionate individual. They are also encouraged to contribute to an endeavor and take sense of pride in doing so even if they have personal circumstances, such as being old. The latter point is probably especially relevant in Japanese society, where it is expected that 25% of the population will be over the age of 65 by 2020.6

Miyazaki’s film are commodities that demonstrate obvious cultural and political beliefs. In The Fetishism of the Commodity, Karl Marx made an interesting argument of commodity as something that transcends its labor value. 7 Beyond the idea of expenditure of labor on plain materials, a commodity takes on the form of a social relationship between producers and consumers. Such attachment of external ideals to an immaterial object is the fetish from which commodity truly arises. People who made the choice of watching Howl’s Moving Castle are users of an object; People who resonate with the story’s themes and morals are the consumers of a commodity, regardless whether the influence is subvert or not. The trick to a successful commodity involves telling an engaging story that speaks to the need of audiences and fill in the gap of a social relationship that they so desire. Howl’s Moving Castle have numerous themes that do exactly that. For example, the moral of being compassionate in face of adversity speaks to people who are experiencing hardships. The lesson of being optimistic even in old-age and contribute meaningfully to society speaks to the elderlies. It is in those instances where people are connected to the story do the films truly become a commodity, something that Miyazaki has done really well. One other interesting idea is the way with which the ideas are conveyed and how it contributes to the effectiveness of the film as a commodity. Howl’s Moving Castle is telling a story that is delicately set up and executed. The film has beautifully composed soundtracks, and composed with scrupulously drawn animations. At one instance, the viewers are shown scenic landscapes of the wilderness, the peaceful and sunshine-laden towns. Right at the next instance, we saw the grotesque warships and the smoke, the inferno, and the conflicts not so distant away. Such alternation of settings, enhanced by the colors and the sounds, dominants the sequence of the film and makes a compelling argument of the beauty of peace and nature and the brutality of war. As Mcluhan puts it, the medium is the message. Although the film did not explicitly mention it, the anti-war theme is effectively conveyed, as it reminds the viewer of the then influential Iraq War. It is in this way that the viewers are consumers of film, as a commodity, as it bestows upon them a social relation to their role in the society, and perhaps a relationship to others who are unappreciative of the value of the moral that the film is transmitting, such as those that took part in inciting conflicts in Iraq back in 2003.

When asked for motivations for Howl’s Moving Castle. Miyazaki confessed that although there are too many unhappy matters in the world, such as war and economic crises. He hopes that people can keep their courage and see the hope as the future is still beautiful and hence worthy of fighting for a chance to survive and explore. It is no doubt that the aspirations he had, however positive, is an idealized one as the future is but another reality where adversity and peace coexists. But it is exactly with the morals of the film that makes his film commodities. We showed that the common aspiration of the consumers that the film is able to evoke helps to create a national imagined community. Additionally, we argued that the consumers are invariably subject to the state ideology as a side effect of consuming the commodity.

1. Hayao Miyazaki, *Howl's moving castle*.
2. Anderson, Imagined Communities
3. Howl’s Moving Castle (film), *https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howl%27s\_Moving\_Castle\_(film)#Box\_office*
4. William Caudill, The Study of Japanese Personality and Behavior
5. Louis Althusser, Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses
6. Elderly People in Japan, [*https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elderly\_people\_in\_Japan*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elderly_people_in_Japan)
7. Karl Marx, Fetishism of the Commodity