

## “Why must fireflies die so young?”

### The Picturesque as an Instrument of Caution in the Works of Studio Ghibli.

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**Abstract:** As opposed to most contemporary usage of the word “picturesque” – which is generally taken to mean visually attractive in a quaint or charming way, or else something that resembles a picture – William Gilpin introduced this term to the English cultural debate in 1792. Gilpin used “picturesque” to typify an aesthetic ideal wherein roughness, raggedness, and ruins would be privileged over smoothness, symmetry and perfection. Over time, his conceptualization of “the picturesque” led to a celebration of disorder, decay, and ruin, a kind of glorification of violence also familiar to the Gothic romances of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, following the unimaginable havoc and mass destruction caused by the two world wars, ruins and images of ruins started to be viewed very differently. This paper seeks to explore how the picturesque mode has been used as an instrument of caution in the works of Studio Ghibli, spearheaded by two creative artists and directors, Hayao Miyazaki and Takahata Isao, who have experienced the horrors of WWII firsthand in their own childhoods. This paper specifically looks at two famous anime feature films produced by Studio Ghibli – *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004) – that deal with the impacts of war and convey strong anti-war messages by uniquely employing the picturesque mode of representation.

**Keywords:** picturesque, William Gilpin, Studio Ghibli, anime, war ruins

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**Introduction:**

Today the word “picturesque” is often associated with ideas of roughness, raggedness, and ruins. Defined by William Gilpin in his 1972 essay “On Picturesque Beauty,” it is an aesthetic of effect that does not really exist independently in nature but only in nature’s perception by the viewer. This phenomenon is created primarily by painters but also by trained viewers and observers. According to Gilpin, when nature is captured at its wildest and most untamed form, one might recognize the quality of picturesque beauty in that kind of a frame instead of in a depiction of a perfectly manicured and well-maintained garden space oozing a kind of an orderly, controlled, symmetrical beauty that is almost saccharine. Eminent painters, especially in the Romantic era, had a deep preoccupation with and intense fascination for ruins. The feeling of “guilt” that the ruins evoked commingled with the destruction of the Roman Catholic past, the tyranny of empire, and the institutions of control dominated by reason. The rebellion against such structures was something that they preferred to idealize. These ruins were the constant reminder of what once was and now no longer remained, and hence, they were channelized into art and seen as sources of artistic inspiration. While some painters like Gilpin glorified the picturesque as an aesthetic ideal, others like John Thelwall saw the need for a kind of political intervention that would help alleviate the suffering stemming from the romanticized disorder that constituted the locus of picturesque art.

However, in the course of time and especially after the two world wars, ruins came to acquire very different connotations, and the purpose behind the depiction of ruins in art underwent radical transformations. This paper seeks to identify the aesthetic of the

picturesque in the works of Studio Ghibli, founded by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, and explore what makes these founders employ the picturesque in such remarkable profusion in most of their works. Their obsession with ruins, disorder, asymmetry, and ragged topography – which tend to be overtly conspicuous in some of their animated feature films – constitute the crux of this paper. The films considered here are *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), which each use the aesthetic of the picturesque at crucial plot junctures. While *Grave of the Fireflies* largely deals with the effects of the American air raids on Japan during the WWII, *Howl's Moving Castle* revolves around a fictional war declared by a whimsical character armed with supernatural powers. Later interviews of the director, Miyazaki, have proven instrumental in unearthing the fact that the fictional war in the movie was actually influenced by the ongoing war in Iran while Miyazaki was working on the film.

I shall first provide a close reading of certain sections of the two chosen films, highlighting how the aesthetic ideal of the picturesque and the motif of ruins are being employed in those sections, before then placing the films within their historical contexts and the specific epochs they aspire to bring to life. I then turn to analyzing how the aesthetic of the picturesque becomes necessary within the realm of these depictions, and how it has evolved after the two world wars.

### **The concept of 'picturesque' and its association with ruins**

William Gilpin, the founding father of the aesthetic ideal of the picturesque, introduced it into the English cultural debate through his groundbreaking work, *Essay on Prints* (1768) and *Observations on the River Wye, and Several Parts of South Wales, etc.*

*Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty; made in the Summer of the Year 1770* (1792). The latter work instructed England's travelers to examine the surface of a country according to the rules of picturesque beauty.<sup>1</sup> Picturesque soon became a part of the emerging romantic sensibility of the eighteenth century alongside the emergence and proliferation of the aesthetic and cultural strands of Gothicism and Celticism. In the 1740s, William Gilpin visited the famous gardens at Stowe and soon after he wrote a book *A Dialogue upon the gardens of the Right Honourable the lord Viscount Cobham at Stowe* (1748). In this book, he distinguished between the moral and the aesthetic beauty to be found in natural scenery and ruined buildings, and this work is understood to have laid the foundations for his later writings on the picturesque. Following this, Gilpin took a series of summer tours between 1768 and 1776 in several areas of Britain, traveling, writing, and sketching widely. His travel narratives were not in the form of guidebooks and did not feature itineraries, mileage, or directions. Instead, they contained his examination of different regions in accordance with the picturesque eye and imagination. Thus, he was able to offer aesthetic guidance to amateur artists and travelers. Overall, Gilpin argued that the sublime and the beautiful – as theorized by a near-contemporary, Edmund Burke – were not the only appropriate standards of taste in art criticism and added a third category between the two. This category was what he termed the picturesque. Many critics have said that this was originally a term of judgment applied specifically to the landscape paintings of Claude and Poussin, but Gilpin later used it to figure out if a natural landscape was fine enough to be painted.

According to Gilpin, the picturesque was that peculiar kind of beauty which is agreeable in a picture.<sup>2</sup> Gilpin went on to suggest that in order to qualify as picturesque,

an object must have a rough surface, not a smooth one: to his mind, smoothness can be considered beautiful but roughness is what constitutes the picturesque. Gilpin challenged Edmund Burke's ideas, which privileged smoothness as the most considerable source of beauty. In his famous work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Burke proposes that beauty, which is characterized by smoothness, proportion, symmetry, and uniformity, evokes feelings of love, and it relaxes and soothes the mind. Sublimity, on the other hand, gives rise to feelings of anxiety and fear, and it is triggered by extremes like extreme height, darkness, vastness, or excessive light.<sup>3</sup> However, Gilpin's idea of the picturesque belonged to neither category: the beautiful nor the sublime. According to Gilpin, in the case of picturesque representation, smoothness seemed somewhat odd. He believed "the reverse of this is the case; and that the ideas of *neat* and *smooth*, instead of being picturesque, in fact disqualify the object, in which they reside, from any pretensions to *picturesque beauty*".<sup>4</sup> Gilpin says that roughness forms the most essential point of difference between the beautiful and the picturesque. Besides, the picturesque does not necessarily excite feelings of horror or awe. He uses the general term 'roughness' but the roughness that he talks about "relates only to the surfaces of bodies: when we speak of their delineation, we use the word *ruggedness*... both are observable in the smaller, as well as in the larger parts of nature—in the outline, and bark of a tree, as in the rude summit, and craggy sides of a mountain".<sup>5</sup>

Referring to gardens, Gilpin writes that an elegant piece of garden-ground makes no figure on canvas even though its shape is pleasing, the combination of the objects within it are harmonious, and the winding of the walk is very beautiful. To him, this is because "the smoothness of the whole, tho right, and as it should be in nature, offends in

picture”.<sup>6</sup> He suggests that the lawn should be turned into a piece of broken ground, rugged oaks should be planted on said lawn instead of flowering shrubs, the edges of the walk should be broken, and it should be given the rudeness of a road, marked with wheel-tracks and scattered with stones and brush-wood.

Following the same line of thought, in the late eighteenth century, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price, two of the founding theoreticians of the picturesque, challenged the fashionable style of landscape gardening and accused Capability Brown of creating only eternal smoothness and sameness instead of roughness, which means that features such as moss-grown terraces and other such intricate details to break up vistas which might otherwise seem smooth.<sup>7</sup> John Thelwall – a radical British orator, political reformer, auto-didact, writer, and journalist, as well as a speech therapist – held very different view of the picturesque, though. According to E. P. Thomson, Thelwall’s love of the romantic and the picturesque is incompatible with his political activism because the latter demanded interaction and cooperation whereas the former was more concerned with detached contemplation. However, Mary Fairclough has argued that Thelwall’s engagement with the picturesque “should be read not as a retreat from political engagement but as an attempt to rethink and recalibrate such engagement”.<sup>8</sup> That is, when Thelwall was talking about the suffering of the people in the English countryside, he did not want it to end up looking like Gilpin’s picturesque. Gilpin was looking at the suffering as an object of aesthetic contemplation, while Thelwall in a way was writing in order to prevent this picturesque tourism. He talked about the actual problems of the people but in the language of the picturesque. Therefore, Thelwall gives us a kind of

picturesque that is not disengaged from reality, a kind of picturesque that is replete with political implications.

### Studio Ghibli and the picturesque

I now turn to the particular subject of this inquiry. Studio Ghibli Inc. is a Japanese animation film studio with its headquarters in Tokyo. Founded in 1985 by directors Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and producer Toshio Suzuki, Studio Ghibli is best known for its animated feature films like *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989), *Spirited Away* (2001), *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), *Ponyo* (2008) and so on. As well as producing animated feature films, television commercials, and a few television films, the studio has also collaborated with several video game studios on the visual development of numerous games. Notably, most of the animated feature films made by Studio Ghibli address at least one prominent social issue or another. Though these movies mostly cater to kids and young adults, adults can watch and connect with these movies for this reason.

Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and Toshio Suzuki are the founders of Studio Ghibli, all of whom “manage to create colorful sceneries with adventurous atmospheres while also, during several occasions, engaging in realistic contemporary and historical elements”,<sup>9</sup> and Miyazaki's stories in particular “manage to move both children and adults, as they are thrown into fictional, but still credible worlds”.<sup>10</sup> This is something that sets this production house apart from other competitors, and much of it has to do with the founders of Studio Ghibli who have gone through several traumatic episodes in their lives mostly due to war, particularly the death and destruction of WWII. This is one of the

primary reasons why most of these feature films have a ‘picturesque’ quality to them and feature wars in some way or another. They are replete with images of ruins and disorder, of a kind of beauty that is sprinkled with decay and decrepitude and a palpable intermingling of life and death in both their thematic and aesthetic depictions.

For Miyazaki in particular, he has reported that some of his earliest memories are those of bombed-out cities.<sup>11</sup> In 1944 when Miyazaki was three years old, his family evacuated to Utsunomiya.<sup>12</sup> The bombing of Utsunomiya in 1945, led to the family’s evacuation once again and this time they moved to Kanuma.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Miyazaki repeatedly suffered from digestive problems as a child, and he was even told that he would not live beyond the age of twenty, which made him feel like an outcast.<sup>14</sup><sup>15</sup> For almost ten years, from 1947 to 1955, Hayao Miyazaki’s mother Yoshiko suffered from spinal tuberculosis. She spent the first few years in hospital and was then nursed at home.<sup>16</sup> Yoshiko has been described as a strict, intellectual woman who regularly questioned conventions and socially accepted norms<sup>17</sup> and she shared a very close relationship with her son. It is said that she had a very strong influence on him, especially on his later works.<sup>18</sup> Unlike his co-founder Takahata, Miyazaki is involved in almost all steps of production of his movies: ideating, writing, drawing, storyboarding, and animation alike.<sup>19</sup>

In Isao Takahata’s case, he is said to have had firsthand experience of the horrors of war, having survived an extremely devastating U.S. air raid on his hometown during the World War II.<sup>20</sup> One can clearly see how this particular experience later went on to inspire *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), a path-breaking creation in the genre of Japanese animated feature films. As a part of Takahata’s obituary, Jasper Sharp writes “*Grave of*



*the Fireflies* presented an emotionally harrowing account of a young brother and sister left to fend for themselves at the tail end of the war after their mother is killed in an allied bombing raid".<sup>21</sup>

### **War Ruins in *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988):**

*Grave of the Fireflies* is a novel published by Akiyuki Nosaka in 1967, which was later adapted into a film by Isao Takahata, who had a very similar experience in his childhood as described in the novel. Masami Ito's article on Isao Takahata in *The Japan Times* also states that Takahata was just nine years old when the United States of America bombed his hometown on the twenty-ninth of June, 1945. From here: "Takahata fled his home in terror during the air raid, running away barefoot in his pajamas with one of his sisters. The incendiary bombs started a firestorm that tore through the city. 'We were lucky to make it out alive,' he says. Takahata recalls seeing piles of dead bodies on the streets as the pair made their way back home".<sup>22</sup> This harrowing experience is what later led him to conceptualize *Grave of the Fireflies* in 1988. *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) is a film that revolves around the efforts of a young boy, Seita, as he tries to protect himself and his little sister Setsuko from the horrors of the American air raids on Japan. This film is replete with picturesque imagery, which includes graphic albeit animated images of rotting corpses infested by maggots, tumbledown buildings, bombed-out localities, heaps of dead bodies, dust and debris, and haggard survivors scavenging to survive.

The movie provides a very stark exposure to wartime violence, brutality, and the heartrending suffering of Seita and Setsuko, who have been rendered homeless and motherless by the bombing raid. We see the idea of the picturesque changing in these

movies. While in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, ruins were the subject of artistic and aesthetic delight – something that would be glorified and romanticized – here, having witnessed the unimaginable havoc wreaked by the two world wars in the twentieth century, comparable ruins and images of ruins were viewed very differently, especially in the countries that were directly involved in and affected by those wars. For Japan in particular, then-American president Truman ordered the bombing of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which wiped out hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians in truly horrific ways that continued for years after the bombs were actually dropped. Takahata's film does not spare viewers these realities, as even beyond its imagery, it culminates in the death of its two child protagonists, who succumb to starvation and malnutrition. Now, rather than being used as an aesthetic ideal, ruins started to be used to depict the horrors of the war and to send cautionary messages that war is an institution that must be condemned and averted at all costs through peaceful negotiations.



**Figure 1: Ruined cityscapes in Kobe**



**Figure 2: Ruined buildings**

Figure 1 and 2 are scenes from the movie *Grave of the Fireflies* that depict the ruined cityscapes and buildings of Kobe right after the bombing raids. In his essay “On

Picturesque Beauty” (1792), Gilpin famously writes that a piece of Palladian architecture with the perfect proportion of its parts, the symmetry of the whole structure, and so on will be highly pleasing, but “if we introduce it in a picture, it immediately becomes a formal object, and ceases to please”.<sup>23</sup> He further opines that if a painter wished to give that piece of architecture a picturesque beauty, then they ought to use the mallet instead of the chisel: that is, they ought to beat down one half of the structure, deface the other, and throw the mutilated parts of the architecture around in heaps: “In short, from a *smooth* building we must turn it into a *rough* ruin”.<sup>24</sup> That is exactly what we find in the movie *Grave of the Fireflies*. Almost all the buildings in Kobe are in a state of ruin. Even the schools and other public institutions that the survivors seek out for shelter are mostly destroyed. The stark contrasts between the perfect idyllic state of nature and the war-ravaged towns with their bombed-out buildings are intensified with the help of a series of juxtapositions.

As Dani Cavallaro writes in his monograph *The Art of Hayao Miyazaki* (2006), *Grave of the Fireflies* indeed evokes an undiluted, inconsolable, and consummate kind of woe, “which no vague promises of otherworldly rewards could ever sublimate, and which the bucolic beauty of nature amplifies with harrowing irony”.<sup>25</sup> Cavallaro also states that this effect is achieved chiefly by means of visual contrasts, which are stark and effective uses of juxtapositions. *Grave of the Fireflies* earnestly foregrounds the assaults on civilian areas, depicting some of the most destructive military operations in the history of the world “and the attendant deluge of black rain caused by ash-bloated clouds, unsentimentally exposing images of charred, disfigured and fly-infested corpses, of crawling maggots, of appalling injuries”.<sup>26</sup> What one must keep in mind while watching

*Grave of the Fireflies* is that Isao Takahata does not glorify or romanticize the war ruins in this movie. He takes no artistic pleasure in the ruins. The message he wants to put out there through the depiction of these ruins is extremely political in nature, akin to the project of John Thelwall. That is, through these ruins, Takahata emphasizes the unimaginable suffering of ordinary civilians and innocent children, all in order to criticize and condemn the institution of war. This is not done from a position of detachment or aesthetic contemplation, then, but instead to foster anti-war consciousness and sentiments among his audience.



**Figure 3: The corpse of the mother**



**Figure 4: Charred bodies**

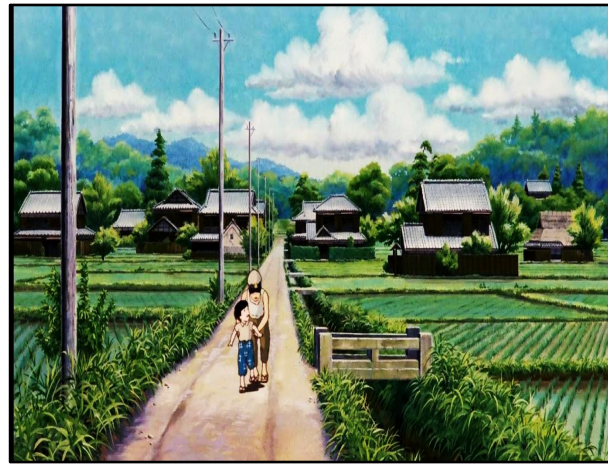
Cavallaro further writes that the movie also “persistently celebrates the glorious resilience of the natural environment in the face of the most abominable manifestations of human folly”.<sup>27</sup> This is done by lavishly throwing in images of blissful tranquility like lush fields and calm ponds, the ocean and its majestic serenity, the vast and kaleidoscopic sky, and the beauty of myriad creatures like seagulls, crabs, dragonflies, and the eponymous fireflies themselves. All these images, according to Cavallaro, have been “rendered with achingly luscious painterliness”,<sup>28</sup> which further heightens the effect of



the picturesque in the film. The constant juxtaposition of images of tranquility includes the two motherless children playing in the laps of Mother Nature, chasing fireflies, hoping that their father will return from the war soon and solve most of their troubles, against the images of death, decay, and devastation, trees with gnarled branches standing naked against barren, war-ravaged backdrops, blasted-out buildings with broken windows, and shattering edifices.



**Figure 5: Tranquil nature**



**Figure 6: Peaceful townscapes**

Especially relevant in this context of the images of ruins and devastation so heavily employed by Studio Ghibli films is Jonathan Jones' account of important historical shifts perceived in the light of ruination. Jones writes that in the eighteenth century, ruins were chiefly objects of contemplation, reverie, sober enjoyment, and an opportunity to reflect on the passing of empires, and the vanity of human effort, but at the same time, "in an age abandoning its religion, they were also reassuring images of what survives, what remains of us".<sup>29</sup> He writes that artists back in the 1700s took delight in ruins and drugged on decay, they were acutely drawn by "the broken sensuality of the past".<sup>30</sup> He observes that in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, ruins carry drastically different

connotations due to the very means by which they seem to materialize. Jones writes, “there’s a difference between a ruin that is the product of slow centuries, the richly rotting fruit of time, and a building whose ruin takes place in a moment: the difference between dying of old age and murder”.<sup>31</sup> Jones’ account becomes important here because what Isao Takahata focuses on in *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) are ruins of the latter kind: that is, the ruins that take place in a moment rather than over time, and that are caused by death, violence, and sudden devastation as opposed to old age. As this demonstrates, the meaning and use of the “picturesque” mode has evolved over time from a celebratory, ruminatory aesthetic in the romantic period to an admonitory and cautionary one in the postmodern period.

Interestingly, in *Grave of the Fireflies* we find an additional kind of ruin: the ruin of the bodies of innocent civilians, especially children. In various places this includes images of dead bodies with severed limbs, charred from head to toe and thrown carelessly in ditches, or of children visiting their parents in makeshift hospitals only to discover that their bodies have been so drastically transformed that they are barely recognizable. Perhaps more starkly still, viewers cannot avoid the mangled, diseased bodies of Seita and Setsuko. At the very beginning of the movie, we find Seita’s drooping body reclined against a pillar; he is covered with cuts and bruises and the janitor remarks that he won’t be alive for too long. In one of the later scenes, which is essentially a flashback, we also get to see Setsuko’s infected body, her tiny back covered with rashes and red bumps, her hair is infested with lice; she is also suffering from a stomach infection and eventually dies of malnutrition. As critics have noted, “The tragedy of this realistic depiction is compounded by the fact it is partly autobiographical. The author, Nosaka Akiyuki, was

separated from his family during a bombing raid and was the only caretaker of his sixteen-month-old stepsister, who eventually perished from malnutrition under his care".<sup>32</sup> The death of the beautiful fireflies seems to symbolize the fates of Seita and Setsuko themselves, who were once so full of life and vitality but are now almost on the verge of eternal ruin.

Though director Isao Takahata as well as writer Akiyuki Nosaka have both declared that this story was not strictly an anti-war tale but instead attempted to hand down the memory of war to the subsequent generations,<sup>33</sup> several critics and scholars like Daisuke Akimoto, Toshio Suzuki, Roger Ebert, Ernest Rister, who have all written extensively on this particular Studio Ghibli production, have recognized it as one of the best war films conveying a strong anti-war message. As Akimoto puts it, "The negative image of the war as 'violence' causes an 'anti-war' sentiment inside the hearts of audience, and therefore, it is fair to assume that this film can be categorized as an 'anti-war film'".<sup>34</sup>

Akimoto also identifies violence on three different levels in the movie- physical violence in the form of the war, psychological violence experienced by the two siblings due to the war and the abusive behaviour of their aunt, and structural violence for which the government, police and the society at large were equally responsible.<sup>35</sup> In addition to these, "looking contextually at *Grave*, the film raises questions about how Japanese should talk about their history—one full of terrible suffering and yet also one of atrocities enacted against other Asian countries in the name of nationalism".<sup>36</sup> These are all complex forms of violence and suffering that can also take shape in the mute forms of picturesque ruins.

### **The Picturesque in *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004)**

In Gilpin's words, "Picturesque composition consists in uniting in one whole a variety of parts".<sup>37</sup> The picturesque stands for a diversity of experiences since it combines the beautiful – associated with smoothness, regularity, and order – and the sublime – associated with vastness, magnitude, and intimations of power. A picturesque landscape must definitely possess textured or variegated surfaces because Gilpin wrote that "roughness forms the most essential point of difference between the beautiful and picturesque".<sup>38</sup> Irregular and intricate patterns also constitute the picturesque. In the context of Studio Ghibli, this description will likely bring to mind the picturesque moving castle inhabited by Howl, his apprentice Markl, the fire demon Calcifer, and later by Sophie, because even a cursory glimpse of the moving castle is enough to permanently etch in viewers' minds the peculiar image of the eponymous castle constituting as its exterior, an explosion of diverse spare parts, metallic and non-metallic, all lumped together into a picturesque structure resembling some kind of a humongous demon. According to Gilpin, there was never a greater ornament of landscape than the ruins of a castle: "What painter rejects it, because it is artificial?—What beautiful effects does Vandervelt produce from shipping? In the hands of such a master it furnishes almost as beautiful forms, as any in the whole circle of picturesque objects?".<sup>39</sup> The ruins of a castle as well as banquets, rich furniture, drapery, picturesque objects, pleasing shapes – all of these are found abundantly in Hayao's Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004), so much so that this movie becomes quite the epitome of picturesque mode of art. Like the previous example, this movie – inspired by Dianne Wynne Jones' novel *Howl's Moving Castle* (1986) – also has a raging war that serves as its backdrop. However, the film is picturesque



for various reasons other than the incorporation of war ruins in its art. Here we not only have picturesque landscapes but also picturesque objects and picturesque people: “What Miyazaki’s movies emphasize is not only the enlightening potential of the confrontation with disintegrating structures but also the iconic value of ruins as reminders of the human penchant for destructiveness, be it entirely mindless or ideologically motivated”.<sup>40</sup> An important aspect of the castle’s architectural dimension is that it is built out of an assemblage of diverse mechanical spare parts – “uniting in one whole a variety of parts”<sup>41</sup> - which is what makes the castle look strikingly picturesque at the very first glance. The landscapes that this castle trudges through are also extremely picturesque too, as they include the craggy sides of the mountains jutting out in the background, uneven lands strewn with rocks and stones, rough and rugged cliffs. Sabrina Ferri, in an essay titled “Time in Ruins: Melancholy and Modernity in the Pre-Romantic Natural Picturesque” states that the late eighteenth-century Picturesque writer Carlo Castone della Torre di Rezzonico often lingers on “the steep cliffs, the bubbling brooks, and the old ruined towers, and castles that are so characteristic of the Picturesque repertoire” in his works.<sup>42</sup> We see a similar kind of indulgence in *Howl’s Moving Castle* as well.



**Figure 7: The moving castle**

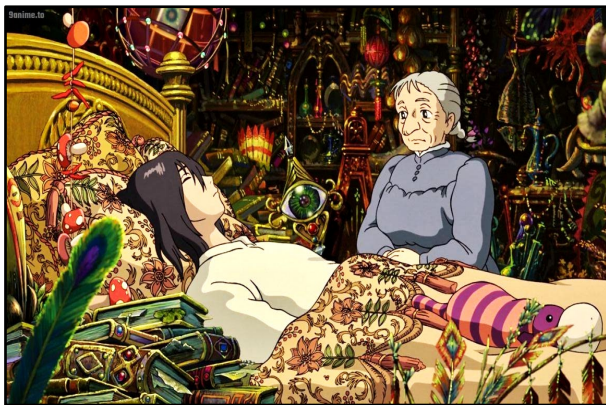


**Figure 8: Picturesque landscape**

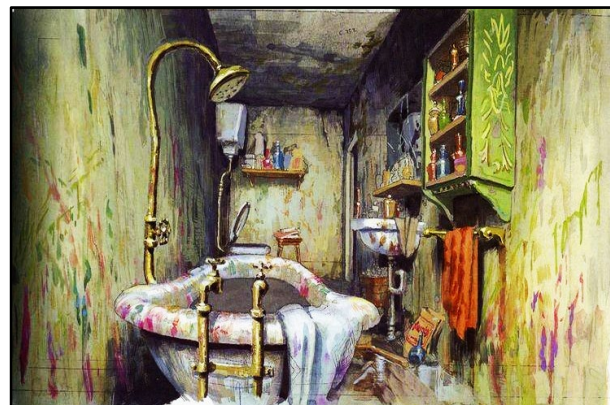
Even the interior of the castle stands out chiefly due to its chaotic disarray. Things are just strewn all over the space, the bathroom looks like it hasn't been cleaned in decades, and everything is submerged under a sickly green layer of moss and dirt. There is a wild profusion of cobwebs and insects crawling out of random nooks and corners of the castle. Howl's room specifically looks like an exploding wilderness full of wildflowers, strange plants, and the most intricately designed filigree objects. In a way the chaotic exterior mirrors inward as well. Just as strangely-shaped items and furniture abound in the castle, Markl too can shapeshift and take on the appearance of an old man when he goes out of the castle. Young Sophie has been turned into an old woman by the Witch of the Waste, her body all bent and misshapen, while the Witch of the Waste is not as young as she looks either, but rather, is under a spell that keeps her youthful. It becomes apparent that Miyazaki's version of *Howl's Moving Castle* focuses on four important themes and motifs, namely war death, metamorphosis, flying and european influences.<sup>43</sup> Each of these, I argue, comes with its own versions of the picturesque to exemplify and amplify it, though I focus here primarily on metamorphosis, in keeping with the way Gilpin suggests a partial metamorphosis of Burke's two concepts.

The theme of metamorphosis can be seen at its best when it comes to the transformation of Sophie. It seems like Sophie's physical age floats through the film mirroring her psychological age, her self-esteem, the way she sees herself and wants to portray herself.<sup>44</sup> It seems like there is a deliberate complexity introduced in the realm of time which creates a huge gap between appearance and reality, especially when it comes to characters like Sophie and the Witch of the Waste. The ruins here constitute living proof of the fact that a lot of time has elapsed whether or not it might be apparent. The

presence of ruins in *Howl's Moving Castle* “defines more the historical identity of a place than its intrinsic beauty”.<sup>45</sup> The decay calls to mind the incessant flow of time that affects human and non-human things alike because similar divergences are found in the canine characters as well as in the Scarecrow. In the initial novel, the dog that followed the Witch of the Waste was actually a young man known as Percival, but in Miyazaki's film, the same dog is named Heen, an unreliable spy who ran errands for the Witch but later became Sophie's sidekick. Similarly, Turnip Head was actually a blonde and handsome man whose real name was Prince Justin and who had been placed under a spell that transformed him to a scarecrow. Both the dog and the scarecrow are picturesque in their depiction, with the former being flabby and unkempt while the latter is dressed in patched and shabby clothes.



**Figure 9: Chaotic room interiors**



**Figure: Shabby bathroom**

Many more picturesque characters, often in the form of creatures with blob-like heads and wiggling bodies, tentacular limbs which can leak through gaps and crevices, feature in this movie. Likewise, Howl projects himself as both an angel and a demon. He can turn into “a grim bird of prey, vampirically fanged, covered with metallic plumage,

and equipped with intimidating talons".<sup>46</sup> He turns into this creature only when he has to fight, dismantle war weapons, and defend himself from his enemy. Otherwise, "Howl is portrayed quite light-heartedly as an amusingly vain and moody young man, but his transformations into what looks like a gigantic bird of prey and his one-man mission to defuse the weapons of war that fill the skies around him suggest a more intense and dark form of masculinity".<sup>47</sup> The picturesque is thus employed when Howl reacts out of desperation and self-preservation, either to attack or to defend.

Then in the case of Sophie, the Witch of Waste has morphed her into a very old woman, thus violating her body against her will. Interestingly though, Sophie embraces her emaciated body, and not for a single moment do we see her regretting what happened to her. Instead, she takes the change in stride and keeps making herself useful around the castle so that she can break the spell with the help of Calcifer, the fire demon. In one of the later scenes. Madame Sulliman lures the Witch of the Waste to drain her powers and restores her to her actual appearance, once again we find an emaciated mass of wrinkles replacing the proud stature of the witch. She is transformed to a helpless old woman who needs to be taken care of. All of these picturesque transformations are inherently linked with violence and violation in some way.





**Figure 11: An emaciated Sophie**



**Figure: The Witch of the Waste**

According to Cavallaro, even though the film strongly conveys a pacifist message, it does not pander to utopianism because the war issue actually remains open-ended in the film. Or instance, “Madam Suliman puts an end to the war for the most cogent, if also the most disarmingly plain, reason: namely, the fact that war is idiotic”.<sup>48</sup> As Cavallaro continues, the ruler’s “eventual decision to terminate the conflict is indubitably felicitous and makes it possible for the film to end under the canopy of a joyfully fair sky, yet it is made to appear quite sudden and arbitrary. This is a way of suggesting that the very opposite choice—the decision to start a war—could just as simply be made at any point in time, no less unexpectedly and no less capriciously”.<sup>49</sup> Therefore, what can be inferred from the film and its use of the picturesque in association with violence, violation, and the futility of war, is a loud and clear anti-war message, much like *Grave of the Fireflies*. Even though both Jones, the writer of the original novel, and Miyazaki himself were very young during World War II, their reactions to the war have gone in quite opposite directions.<sup>50</sup> Vieira and Kunz further maintain write that while Jones tends to leave the actual war out of her books, Miyazaki never misses a chance to represent both the horrors of war and the effects that the bombing raids can bring into an anime feature film.<sup>51</sup> In fact, Miyazaki

himself declared in a June 2005 interview with the US magazine *Newsweek* that *Howl's Moving Castle* was influenced and profoundly affected by the then-ongoing war in Iraq.<sup>52</sup> I argue that one primary difference between the two movies is that whereas the *Grave of the Fireflies* is an overtly graphic representation of the brutality of war which ends on a solemn note of tragedy, *Howl's Moving Castle* is more covert attempt at debunking the myths of glory and honor associated with war and it has a happy ending.

However, in neither of the two movies is the picturesque used purely for aesthetic delight governed by a kind of detached, artistic contemplation. Instead, both Miyazaki and Takahata have used it consciously and powerfully to get their message across. While the message appears to be clear and direct in *Grave of the Fireflies*, it is more subtle in *Howl's Moving Castle* and that is just a trait that distinguishes Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli's work. Just like Cavallaro explains, "Miyazaki's films bear witness to a keen understanding of animation as the most unfettered and potentially the most creative cinematic form thanks to its knack of transcending the laws of physics and biology, as well as flouting the expectations of logic and mimesis with carnivalesque gusto".<sup>53</sup> Cavallaro further states that in keeping with animation's irreverent and feasibly anarchic spirit, Miyazaki's films have always consistently celebrated ambiguity and irony over dogmatism, and diversity over uniformity, especially in the recognition that human virtues and flaws are always inextricably intertwined with each other and that constitutes the true spirit of the picturesque which resisted all kinds of institutionalized order and celebrated flaws and ambiguity over the stringent dicta of rationality. However, even though the carnivalesque plot of *Howl's Moving Castle* is primarily centered around the character development of Sophie, as several critics have pointed out, it is still arguably

the war that has the greatest impact on the viewers. The viewer is taken on a practically-political ride that critiques the contemporary and international politics surrounding the Iraq war and the film is replete with battle scenes and fires. The impact of the war scenes and war ruins is so tremendous that it is practically impossible to dismiss and disregard the war, even in order to focus solely on Sophie's journey.<sup>54</sup>

### **Conclusion:**

Ruins, dilapidated buildings, and derelict imagery feature regularly in Studio Ghibli movies, especially the later Miyazaki movies: a savvy viewer might be strongly reminded of the solitary gardens of Laputa and the theme park of Spirited Away. Other critics have also noted as much: "Reflecting on the metaphorical connotations of such locations, it could be argued that cinematic images of dilapidated dwellings and even entire cities evoke a "Gothic" fascination with ruins".<sup>55</sup> The attitudes to decay and devastation evoked by Studio Ghibli films, however, is not a passive one governed by contemplation, reverie, aesthetic delight, and sober enjoyment. Instead, as Jonathan Jones states of a different artistic tradition, they can serve an opportunity to reflect on "the passing of empires and the vanity of human effort. Yet in an age abandoning its religion, they were also reassuring images of what survives, what remains of us".<sup>56</sup>

From such examples, it becomes quite clear that the predominant definition of the "picturesque" has evolved over the years, gaining more depth and complexity as the world continues to be ravaged by mindless wars. Artists from the mid-1900s onward could no longer take delight in ruins and be drunk on decay. They were horrified by the war and its aftermath, and as a result, they could no longer look at ruins the same way as their

predecessors had. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, ruins started to carry substantially different connotations, and this was reflected in art in major ways.

Spearheaded by Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata, Studio Ghibli was literally born out of such complicated, conflicted feelings associated with war. Both of these co-founders had experienced war-related trauma, and they found an outlet in their art, which is one reason why most of their creations have themes and motifs depicting war, and their stance has always been cautionary. In fact, all the Ghibli films seem to have been very consciously created, always carrying a message, a moral, a warning, and so on. Thus, we have come a long way from William Gilpin and his idea of the picturesque as a purely aesthetic ideal to a kind of picturesque which is politically charged, has repercussions, and demands accountability.

Here is another place to reiterate Jonathan Jones' contention that "there's a difference between a ruin that is the product of slow centuries, the richly rotting fruit of time, and a building whose ruin takes place in a moment: the difference between dying of old age and murder".<sup>57</sup> Studio Ghibli mostly treats the latter as its subject matter and presents to us a kind of picturesque which if viewed from a position of detachment or merely as an object of contemplation might result in the repetition of a very infamous history.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup>William Gilpin. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, 1792.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Edmund Burke and Abraham Mills. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful; With an Introductory Discourse Concerning Taste*. New York, Harper, 1844.

<sup>4</sup>William Gilpin. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, 1792, pp 6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 7

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 8

<sup>7</sup>Jeffrey Auerbach. "The picturesque and the homogenisation of Empire", *The British Art Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 47-54.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Caroline Louisa Fairclough. John Thelwall and the Politics of the Picturesque. *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, 9, pp. 1.

<sup>9</sup>Einar Schipperges Tjus. "A Voice Against War Pacifism in the animated films of Miyazaki Hayao", Stockholm University Stockholm, Sweden: 2018, pp: 4.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid, 4-5.

<sup>11</sup>Hayao Miyazaki. *Starting Point, 1979–1996*. Translated by Cary, Beth; [Schodt, Frederik L.](#) (2009 ed.). San Francisco: [Viz Media](#).

<sup>12</sup>Helen [McCarthy](#). *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (2002 ed.). Berkeley: [Stone Bridge Press](#).

<sup>13</sup>Miyazaki, Hayao (May 22, 1988). Takeuchi, Masatoshi (ed.). "The Animation of Hayao Miyazaki, Isao Takahata and Studio Ghibli". *Kinema Junpo* (in Japanese). Tokyo: Kinema Junpo (published July 16, 1995) (1166): 57–58.

<sup>14</sup>Karen Han. "[Watch the 4-hour documentary that unravels Hayao Miyazaki's obsessions](#)". *Polygon*. [Vox Media](#). [Archived](#) from the original on June 3, 2020. Retrieved September 2, 2021.

<sup>15</sup>Kaku Arakawa. (March 30, 2019). "Drawing What's Real". *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki*. Episode 2 (in Japanese). Japan: [NHK](#).

<sup>16</sup>Helen [McCarthy](#). *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation* (2002 ed.). Berkeley: [Stone Bridge Press](#).

<sup>17</sup>Jeff Lenburg. *Hayao Miyazaki: Japan's Premier Anime Storyteller*. New York City: [Infobase Publishing](#).

<sup>18</sup>Margaret Talbot. "The Auteur of Anime". *The New Yorker*. Vol. 80, no. 43. New York City: [Condé Nast](#). pp. 64–75.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas Lamarre. *The anime machine. A media theory of animation*. University of Minnesota Press, pp-87.

<sup>20</sup>Masami Ito. "Isao's Takahata's stark world of reality" *The Japan Times*. September 12, 2015.

<sup>21</sup>Jasper Sharp. "Isao Takahata obituary" *The Guardian*. 8 April, 2018, pp 2.

<sup>22</sup>Masami Ito. "Isao's Takahata's stark world of reality" *The Japan Times*. September 12, 2015.

<sup>23</sup>William Gilpin. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, 1792, pp 7.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid, 7-8

<sup>25</sup>Dani Cavallaro. *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: 2006, pp 3.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid, 78

<sup>27</sup>Ibid, 78

<sup>28</sup>Ibid, 78

<sup>29</sup>Jonathan Jones. "Things Fall Apart." *The Guardian*, 11 October, 2001, 2.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, 3

- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 13
- <sup>32</sup> Wendy Goldberg. "Transcending the Victim's History: Takahata Isao's Grave of the Fireflies", University of Minnesota Press, *Mechademia*, Volume 4, 2009, pp 40.
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- <sup>34</sup> Akimoto, Daisuke. "Peace education through the animated film "Grave of the Fireflies" physical, psychological, and structural violence of war. " *Political Science*, 2014, pp 41.
- <sup>35</sup> Akimoto, Daisuke. "Peace education through the animated film "Grave of the Fireflies" physical, psychological, and structural violence of war." *Political Science*, 2014, pp 33-43.
- <sup>36</sup> Goldberg, Wendy. (2009). "Transcending the Victim's History: Takahata Isao's Grave of the Fireflies", University of Minnesota Press, *Mechademia*, Volume 4, 2009, pp 40.
- <sup>37</sup> William Gilpin. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, 1792, pp 19.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, 6
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, 27
- <sup>40</sup> Dani Cavallaro. *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: 2006, pp: 3.
- <sup>41</sup> William Gilpin. *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; On Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape: to which is Added a Poem, On Landscape Painting*, London, 1792, pp 19.
- <sup>42</sup> Sabrina Ferri. "Time in Ruins: Melancholy and Modernity in the Pre-Romantic Natural Picturesque" *Italian Studies*, 69:2, 204-230, pp 205.
- <sup>43</sup> Catarina Vieira and Sahra Kunz. "Howl's Moving Castle: Perspectives from Literature to Film", Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave. 2018.
- <sup>44</sup> Collin Odell and Michelle Le Blanc. Studio Ghibli: The Films of Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata. Kamera Books (2009) p. 127.
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- <sup>46</sup> Dani Cavallaro. *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: 2006, pp 160.
- <sup>47</sup> Susan J Napier. *ANIME from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York: 2005, pp 123.
- <sup>48</sup> Dani Cavallaro. *The Anime Art of Hayao Miyazaki*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: 2006, pp 171.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, 171
- <sup>50</sup> Catarina Vieira and Sahra Kunz. "Howl's Moving Castle: Perspectives from Literature to Film", Instituto Politécnico do Cávado e do Ave. 2018.
- <sup>51</sup> Jonathan Jones. "Things Fall Apart." *The Guardian*, 11 October, 2001.
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- <sup>54</sup> Lindsay Smith. "War, Wizards and Words: Transformative Adaptation and Transformed Meanings in Howl's Moving Castle", *The Projector; Bowling Green Vol. 11, Iss. 1, (Spring 2011): 36-56*.
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- <sup>56</sup> Jonathan Jones. "Things Fall Apart." *The Guardian*, 11 October, 2001, 2.
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