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Metamorphosis and Identity: Psychoanalytical Notes to
Miyazaki's ***Spirited Away*** and ***Howl's Moving Castle***

Introduction

Far greater liberties can be taken by animation than by live-action films. The possibilities of the narratives are enriched by unrestricted visual images that offer unique means of exploring and portraying states of desire, conscious and unconscious realities, as well as different layers of relationships and experiences. This leads to a fusion of the traditional and modern roles of representation. *Anime* from acclaimed Japanese director Hayao Miyazaki, particularly the Academy Award winner *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, 2003) and Oscar-nominated *Howl's Moving Castle* (*Hauru no Ugoku Shiro*, 2004), which in recent years have acquired a global cult status, offer new perspectives on human subjectivity. Through their playful use of the motif of transformation, striking similarities in the development of the plots and ambiguous *dénouements*, the movies problematize the fundamental question of identity, representing a close illustration of some of the core psychoanalytical concepts found in Lacanian theory.

Both *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away* are distinctive by their duality: they are, in Jungian terminology, simultaneously allegorical and symbolic.¹ The allegorical "conscious" dimension of the movies is intimately connected to the concept of initiation and represents an obvious, but not necessarily false key to the plots. It can be constructed in this manner: the movies present the physical journeys of two young girls, Sophie and Chihiro, as processes of self-discovery, learning and growing up, more or less along the tradition of a *Bildungsroman*. On a closer look, however, the symbolical content in the textual material of the two *anime* is a veiled presence that holds intricate psychological depths and is related to the motif of metamorphosis and the issue of language. Thus, especially by operating a shift of the spotlight from the female to the main male characters, Howl and Haku, the movies can be said to represent an elaborate excursion into the psyche. With the use of Lacanian theory, I will show how the male characters are entrapped in the order of the Imaginary, in a manner similar to patients seeking treatment, assuming the position of their ideal-egos completely. This offers a clear illustration of the concept of *méconnaissance*, which the process of the girls' initiation already suggests. In this light, the girls act as agents that enable the males to transcend the mirror-stage; through the means of a much-needed dialectization, an acceptance and partial integration in the Symbolic is achieved, with all the elements of the diegesis complementing each other and converging towards staging the equivalent of a successful psychoanalytical treatment.

A strong basis for this interpretation will be provided by the similarities between the two *anime*, which form a striking pattern, considering the substantial differences in their sources. *Spirited Away* was produced without having a previous script, as declared by Miyazaki in an interview from 2002: "I don't have the story finished and ready when we start work on a film. [...] So the story develops when I start drawing storyboards. [...] We never know where the story will go but we just keeping working on the film as it develops." *Howl's Moving Castle*, on the other hand, is based on the novel bearing the same title, by British author Diana Wynne Jones. For this reason, the deliberate choices regarding the elements that are added or left out in *Howl's Moving Castle*, when compared to the original book, are especially relevant. Side by side, the two movies are involved in a silent dialogue, sharing a common message, arguing for the same point from equal positions, and striving to describe one identical event. Together, they unravel the myth of the stable, epistemological identity, integrating it into a postmodern discourse on subjectivity.

変身 (henshin), as metamorphosis is called in Japanese, lies at the very core of animation; the habitual stance towards its role in *anime* is that it supports the construction of identity in human society by tackling and transcending the notions of species, social status, gender or age.² The transformations in *Spirited Away* and *Howl's Moving Castle* are remarkable primarily by their omnipresence. Both movies start with, and their plots indeed rely on, a radical change in the social roles, (and, in the case of *Howl's Moving Castle*, the age and appearance) of Chihiro and Sophie. This is accompanied in both stories by the girls entering a magical realm. In *Spirited Away*, this is represented by the bathhouse, equivalent to the world of the spirits. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, it is the magic castle itself which shelters Sophie after she is cursed by an evil witch and has become an old woman. Transformations take various shapes: moving from one physical place to another, shifts in appearance, zoomorphism or changing of age, as well as acquiring new roles, names and personality traits. Four main questions arise, which will be dealt with in the following sections, although not in this particular order: first, can we equal the structure and function of the process of initiation with that of the metamorphosis in the *anime*? Secondly, how can Lacanian psychoanalytical theory serve towards the interpretation of the concepts of initiation and metamorphosis? Thirdly, what is the role of language and which significance does the uncovering of the male characters' histories take? Finally, what exactly is "identity" – or can one even speak of something of the sort – and how do the two *anime* ultimately portray this notion?

The Lacanian Imaginary and Symbolic Orders

Since psychoanalytical thought will be instrumental in shedding light on the processes that shape "identity" in the two *anime*, it is worth taking a short but hopefully clear detour in this field. Jacques Lacan's triad of the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic is by all means a complex configuration, made even more difficult by the fact that throughout his entire work, the famous French psychoanalyst constantly developed these concepts and added to their intricacy. For our purposes, however, it will suffice to give a broad outline of Lacan's concepts of the Imaginary, especially the notions of the "ego", the "ideal-ego" and the "mirror-stage", and that of the Symbolic, the order of language and signs (the Law / *name-of-the father* concepts will be discussed elsewhere). Somewhat helpfully, the Real is what is left, everything that does not fall into the categories of the Imaginary and the Symbolic and that which cannot be described.

In his 1949 "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the / Function",³ Lacan explained the mirror-stage as the event which corresponds to a human child of six months or more

recognizing his own image in a mirror. A libidinal dynamic emerges between the child and this specular image, which is based on a fundamental contradiction: the real body of the child is defined by fragmentation, whereas the mirror image represents the mirage of unity; thus, even prior to entering social systems, the ego of the child falsely identifies with the ideal-ego presented by the mirror. According to Lacan: "This moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's semblable [...] the dialectic that will henceforth link the / to socially elaborated situations".⁴ Eleven years later, in his "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation", Lacan explains that the ideal-ego is a promise of future synthesis towards which the ego tends, and it is nothing more than the illusion of unity on which the ego is built,⁵ an imaginary misrecognition of the ego identifying with its image termed *méconnaissance*.⁶ Expanding on his theory and generalizing also to adults, since the ego itself is driven by the desire to be stronger,⁷ it can be deduced that the image of an all-powerful, unified, perfect ego is what everyone is striving for. Typically, the relationship between the two is characterized by "primary narcissism", a love/hate relationship, potential violence and rivalry.

For Lacan, the relations that happen within the order of the Imaginary are not conducive to the emergence of the true psychoanalytical subject, or what I will call for now the "truth". He divides speech into "empty speech"—the normal flow of words that has as its topic the ego and is thus interlinked with the Imaginary order, and "full speech"—the elusive instance and insistence of an element trapped in the Real, that needs to be inscribed in the Symbolic. Lacan gives precedence to the latter. In psychoanalysis, the Symbolic as language, or the totality of signifiers, is crucial, as memory is the symbolic history of the subject, a chain of signifiers linked together. Special attention is warranted by those moments when something goes wrong with memory, when the subject cannot recall a part of his history, a signifier slipping from the signification chain. The instances in which full speech surfaces are those in which slips of the tongue or "unexplainable" lapses occur. As Lacan states, "The unconscious is the chapter of my history that is marked by a blank or occupied by a lie: it is the censored chapter. But the truth can be refound; most often it has already been written elsewhere".⁸ Thus, the way to reach the 'truth' of the subject is via the Symbolic and language. Keeping in mind the elements of the Imaginary and Symbolic and how Lacanian theory reshapes traditional notions of subjectivity, let us return to our examination of transformations in *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away*.

Initiation

There are various possible interpretations as to the roles of mutability of the characters, made none too easy by the complex and sometimes oxymoronic symbolism found in them. By leaving aside mutability that translates as movement between geographic spaces and roughly dividing the transformations into those personality-related and the physical metamorphoses (including zoomorphism, age changes and also, by a stretch, name-changes), I will attempt to first explain the technical differences between initiation and the metamorphosis cases found in the *anime* and how this relates to the concept of identity. I will also re-evaluate the distinctions from a psychoanalytical point of view and develop a hermeneutic strategy for the movies based on the orders described by Jacques Lacan.

Let us consider the plot of the *anime*, which might be summarized at first glance as Sophie and Chihiro going through the rites of initiation in order to gain experience and become better persons. In *Howl's Moving Castle*, Sophie starts off as a shy, mousy eighteen year-old girl leading an unadventurous life and working in a hat-

shop in Market-Chipping; Chihiro from *Spirited Away* is a sullen, spoiled and cowardly ten year-old who resents moving to another city and does nothing but mope on the backseat of her parents' car. Because her family decides to stop and explore an abandoned amusement park, Chihiro finds herself trapped in the spirit world and forced to work for the witch Yobaba, mistress of the bathhouse. The bleak alternative she is given consists in sharing the fate of her parents, who have been transformed into pigs. Sophie, on the other hand, leaves her home after incurring the wrath and curse of the Witch-of-the-Waste and, on her way to her younger sister, meets wizard Howl's moving castle and decides to employ herself there as a housekeeper. By the end of the films, the girls have made friends, faced many obstacles in strange, enchanted worlds and came out of difficult situations as winners, effectively becoming their own improved, braver, more compassionate and wiser selves. Along the way, Sophie and Chihiro not only matured, but also helped uncover the histories of Howl, a dashing young wizard and Haku, a mysterious magical boy, respectively, enabling the males to acknowledge their "true selves" and then be capable of leading happier, more fulfilled lives. For Haku, this entails finding the missing piece of the puzzle that kept him bound in an eternal contract to Yobaba: recalling his name and his older "identity". Howl, who in his childhood had traded off his heart to a falling star in exchange for magical power, first appears as a care-free individual incapable of experiencing emotions or assuming any responsibilities, such as fighting for his country. At the end of the *anime*, however, after a climactic battle which leaves him exhausted and almost dead, the young man receives his heart back from Sophie's hands. To underline the happy ending, Sophie and Howl are seen only minutes later in pastel-coloured clothing (contrasting to their usual dark blue attires), flying away and smiling, while the extradiegetic romantic song from the soundtrack contributes to the general feeling of contentment.⁹ Apparently a straightforward development, but how do these rites of passage really function?

The notion of initiation needs to be reconsidered by analyzing its defining attributes from the structural and the psychoanalytical point of view. Structurally, when experiencing initiation, a character typically starts at point A: we have then, for example, character(X)_a. As the plot unfolds, the character undergoes different changes: character(X)_b, character(X)_c, ... character(X)_y...character(X)_z. It should be noted that all the intermediary phases are in traditional initiation stories non-repeatable and non-interchangeable. Moreover, the instance the character reaches the final stage, represented by character(X)_z, is generally regarded as the climax and end of the series. Psychoanalytically, the upward motion from character(X)_a to the improved character(X)_z demonstrates that initiation can be interpreted as the subject's attempts to become his ideal-ego, the unified, perfect image of himself. This is indeed valid for any of the main characters, as they all acquire superior personality traits, as described previously. As far as this type of transformation goes, becoming character(X)_z means not only a change on the level of the Imaginary, it is *the* change: character(X)_z is the ideal-ego, leaving character(X)_a (the ego) behind. It is, in a manner of speaking, the ultimate Lacanian *méconnaissance*.

Metamorphosis

Although in a manner of speaking quite similar, the metamorphosis in the two *anime* is, counter-intuitively, not equivalent to the process of initiation. The most obvious examples for metamorphosis are the following: Sophie changing her age (and naturally her appearance), Chihiro changing her name, Howl changing his hair-colour, and Haku and Howl's transformations into a flying dragon and a giant bird

respectively.

Sophie's case is perhaps the most appropriate to illustrate the structural pattern behind metamorphosis. Far from being a simple curse that makes her change from an 18 year-old girl into a 90 year-old woman, a spell which is destroyed towards the end of the movie by her bravery and love, the stages of Sophie's metamorphosis, reflected in her outward appearance, contain a large variety of nuances, which might be organized in seven distinct categories. Starting the movie as a young girl with dark brown hair and rather plain features who works and lives in Market Chipping (a),¹⁰ Sophie is transformed by the Witch of the Waste into a 90 year-old woman who is wrinkled and hunchbacked (b); during her life in the castle, however, she also appears from time to time as a young girl with brown hair and nice features (c), a 50-60 year-old woman with less wrinkles who stands up straight (d) and an 18 year-old with long grey hair (e). Furthermore, towards the end of the movie, her facial expressions become sweeter and she looks even younger than 18: in these cases, she appears as either a girl with long silver hair (f), or, at the end of the movie, as one with short silver hair (g). Sophie's changing appearance occurs either off-screen, and it is almost impossible to predict her age during those moments, or on-screen, as she spectacularly switches between two or more stages in a matter of seconds. Although a clear tendency is apparent, with the stages fluctuating back and forth between (b) and (c) in the first third of the movie, then playfully changing between (b), (c) and (d) in a period which exceeds the first half of the movie by a few minutes, allowing for an almost undisturbed fluctuation between (d) and (e), the clear evolution in the last half an hour of the movie is to (f) and (g). The question "which one is the real Sophie?" thus arises almost automatically.

The same technique can be applied to Chihiro's, Howl's and Haku's different stages. When Chihiro is forced into slave labour at the bathhouse, the girl writes down her name, "Ogino Chihiro" (in Japanese the family name usually comes first) in the contract; in Japanese *kanji* this is: 野千尋. Yobaba steals three characters from her name: that is, the first two, which represent her family name, and the very last. The one character left - the third one - becomes her new name: Sen. In fact, the pun is present from the very beginning, as the title of the movie already includes both names: 千と千尋の神 じ. This is read as *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* which means, literally, *Sen and the Spiriting Away of Chihiro*. It is important that the two identities are intertwined and Sen will always be, literally, a part of Chihiro. The males' cases are similar, but hold an additional element. Haku changes often between the shape of a boy and that of a dragon,¹¹ but towards the end of the movie he appears as an uncanny river reduced to its particles of water. Howl transforms from a young man with blond hair, to a red-head, and finally to a black-haired male. On the other hand, he is alternatively a man, a swallow-shaped, graceful bird, a beautiful bird-man bearing an archangel's wings, a repulsive huge bird with just one leg, or a black shapeless monster fighting in the sky.¹² While all of these stages cannot simply be ignored or forgotten at the end of the movies, for some of them, in the case of the males, an impossibility of return to a particular phase is signalled.

Therefore, it can be safely assumed that on the structural level, metamorphosis treats the question of identity differently to initiation; it is not a matter of an orderly series entailing an A, B, C, D... to Z succession, but rather an A,B,C,B,D, B,...Z. The stages enter an upward spiralling motion that indeed concludes in a Z, but this last phase is a problematic one, and it is unclear whether it is the "ideal" or the "real" identity of the subjects. As I will proceed to show, the only moment of recognition or emergence of the truth is the elusive dialectization of a memory, but no identity phase is marked as final by the *anime*.

From a psychoanalytical point of view, metamorphosis operates on the level of the Imaginary as well as the Symbolic. For the Imaginary, it can be said that metamorphosis deals with *méconnaissance* frontally, and is different from initiation in that the (male) characters already are their ideal-egos. The two characters are in a constant state of negotiation with their ego-ideal *doppelgängers*, or maintaining the libidinal relationship with their body-image. Howl is the prime example of these fluctuations: he is vain and self-obsessed, very interested in his own looks, and changes his appearance quite often, including his clothes and hair. It is said that he “steals beautiful girls’ hearts”¹³ and he is devastated when his hair turns a shade too red by accident, prompting him to overreact and fill the castle with green slime.¹⁴ His narcissistic streak is emphasized by his own sorrowful pondering: “What’s the point in living, if you aren’t beautiful...”¹⁵ As all of these elements operate mostly on the level of strengthening the ego, it follows that they can be ascribed to the Imaginary.

The most fascinating aspect by far though is the zoomorphism of both male protagonists. Howl’s huge dark bird of prey and Haku’s white slender dragon are both beautiful and repugnant, but indubitably impressive and terrifying. The easy and frequent transformations of the young men into their alternate selves are an exacerbation of the imaginary misrecognition of the ego identifying with its image. What unnerves is not only that Howl and Haku identify with their physically superior mirror-images; it is the fact that they essentially *are* their mirror images. The extreme power of the ideal-ego, as well as the penchant towards violence, is reflected in the bird’s and the dragon’s ability to fly, to carry and protect the girls, and most of all to fight savagely. In Howl’s case, this is seen during the scenes in which the war has reached Market-Chipping; Haku as a dragon fights against the flock of magical paper-birds and the spell of the witch Zeniba, Yubaba’s good twin. It is almost impossible to describe these ideal-ego images without mentioning the ambiguity connected to them: while both display benevolent behaviour, they are simultaneously portrayed as dangerous creatures which grow fangs, scales, or shed blood; this reveals the inner tension of the Imaginary. In addition, in *Howl’s Moving Castle*, it is made clear that remaining in the form of the ideal-ego is dangerous for Howl: Calcifer, the fire demon/former fallen star, warns him that the longer he keeps his bird-shape, the greater the chances are he will forget he was ever human: “Keep flying and one day you won’t be able to change yourself back”.¹⁶ This means that the stronger the identification with the ideal-ego, the less the opportunity to break free from the Imaginary – which is, from all angles, also the psychoanalytical position.

Furthermore, in both movies, although more clearly in *Howl’s Moving Castle*, almost all other characters experience a physical metamorphosis, paralleling the process undergone by the male protagonists. Such is the case with Markl, Howl’s young assistant, who puts on the appearance of an old man, or, strikingly eloquent, Yobaba’s three magical disembodied heads that are changed into the image of a unified body – a trick meant to disguise the kidnapping of Yobaba’s son. These all serve to reinforce the concept of the misrecognition that occurs in the Imaginary, the problem of the fragmented body and the formative function of the mirror-stage.

The resolution to this problem is diametrically opposed to that offered by the process of initiation: whereas in that case, stage Z was the climax associated with the ideal-I, in the case of metamorphosis, the specular images or the ideal-egos are destroyed completely at the end of the movies: we see Haku’s dragon break into pieces, and Howl’s bird shed all its feathers and disintegrate, the ultimate illustration of the fragmentation that makes up the foundations of the identity created in the Imaginary.

The message, in this case, is that caught up in the realm of the Imaginary, where the ego rules unchallenged and illusions of ideals abound, there is no chance for the individuals to find exit – or the truth - on their own. As Lacan puts it: “psychoanalysis [...] operates in the symbolic [...] by conquering the unconscious, bringing history into being, and reconstructing the signifier [whereas the] ego [...] is constituted in its imaginary status”.¹⁷

The second level of operation for metamorphosis is the Symbolic. The persistence of metamorphosis in its many guises, which abounds in the two narratives, coupled with a decisive refusal to go back to one instance and pronounce it the core, essential moment or period of the subjects’ identities, enables us to think of the transformations as sign-substitutions, similar to the *modus operandi* of the Symbolic. According to Lacan: “[...] we can say it is in the chain of the signifier that meaning *insists*, but that none of the chain’s elements consists in the signification it can provide at the very moment.”¹⁸ These substitutions, while relevant and helping to create the intricate, multilayered web of the subjects’ histories, do not in fact point to a signified, or an ultimate stage A that holds the answers to stage Z, but rather to a continuous quest for meaning.

Language and the Law

In the two *anime*, Haku and Howl constantly attempt to escape the Law (or the *name-of-the-father*, which represents a set of structures shaping social existence made possible by communication, hence the law of language and society)¹⁹ by their excursions into the Imaginary. This becomes clear from the actions of Howl, who is trying to avoid letters from the king ordering him to war,²⁰ or those of royal wizard Madam Suliman which come combined with threats,²¹ causing his free-play with names: to escape the orders, he is at the same time wizards Howl, Jenkins and Pendragon, his motivations made clear from the following exchange:

Howl: Now the king’s ordered me to report to him – as Jenkins and as Pendragon.

Sophie: How many names do you use, Howl?

*Howl: Enough to guarantee my freedom.*²²

Since the truth Lacan speaks of can only be found by an exegesis of speech, it is as Miyazaki claims: “Words are power. [...] words have a great importance”.²³ In this view, any irregularity in the Symbolic is important and should be examined. Such is the case of the restriction related to Howl’s contract with the falling star, which includes an imposition not to talk about it. In *Spirited Away*, Haku’s uneasy relation with language can be sensed in his amnesia: by having forgotten his name, Haku let a signifier slip from the chain.

Haku: Yobaba rules others by stealing their names. You’re Sen here, but keep your real name a secret. [...] If she steals your name, you’ll never find your way home. I no longer remember mine.

Chihiro: Your real name?

*Haku : But it’s strange, I remember yours.*²⁴

Additionally, the same Law is represented by the orders of Yobaba, which Haku manages to circumvent more or less, particularly when he helps Chihiro out, by giving her magical food and helping her get a job, activities which take place on the ground, while Yobaba is seen circling menacingly above.²⁵

Even more interestingly, the Symbolic attacks in the shape of the magical paper birds which come from Zeniba and follow Haku in his “imaginary” dragon-form

maliciously, trying to cause bodily harm.²⁶ Although with Chihiro's help Haku manages to escape the flying flock, his blood splattered on the doors and windows, as well as the one paper bird which secretly attaches itself to the girl, bear testimony towards the range of influence and degree of pain that can be inflicted. That, along with the burning note received by the wizard as a threat from the Witch-of-the-Waste²⁷ in *Howl's Moving Castle*, represent overt cases in which language, depicted by paper, is shown as hostile and insidious.

In both *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Spirited Away*, language proves to be a medium both excessive and lacking: excess provided by the hostile contracts, threatening letters, extra names; lack shown by the impossibility to recall, or speak about something. The lack, combined with the excess, has a direct connection to the link that was lost in the chain of signification, or the memory that was lost from the subject's histories, simultaneously confirming that, as Lacan states, "speech, even when almost completely worn out, retains its value as a *tessera*. Even if it communicates nothing, discourse represents the existence of communication; even if it denies the obvious, it affirms that speech constitutes truth".²⁸

Thus, the form and persistence of the speech acts or impossibility to speak in the two *anime* act as tokens nevertheless and point in two directions: on the one hand, resistance to analysis and on the other, the advent of "full speech", *the* crucial step taken towards the emergence of the truth or the psychoanalytical subject. Therefore, the transformations that Sophie and Chihiro experience become significant from another point of view: more than an initiation, they consist in a transgression, representing an intrusion of external agents in an environment previously familiar to the main male characters, Howl and Haku. Only thus can their histories be brought into being, achieving a reconstruction of subjectivity, or in other words, of the missing signifier, and that is a task for Chihiro and Sophie.

The psychoanalytical subject

It is noteworthy that both movies achieve an almost perfect chronological storytelling – except in a very limited number of circumstances, out of which the most impressive are the moments when Chihiro remembers falling into a river when she was small and that of Sophie falling through a black hole into a scene of Howl's childhood. Both of these are, not coincidentally, the instances linked to the uncovering of the male characters' histories.

Let us first re-examine the case of Howl's past resurfacing, starting with the issue of his different names and the space which the black knob of the castle's magical "dial selector" leads to. Whereas in Wynne Jones' book, it is made clear that Howl's "real" name is Howell Jenkins, this is never mentioned in the animated version. In the novel, the young wizard, his apprentice and Sophie all go in search of the missing part of a verse in the dimension of "nothingness" that the black knob leads into, which turns out to be a house in Wales, where Howl's sister Megan and his nephew Neil live.²⁹ Nevertheless, in Miyazaki's *Howl's Moving Castle*, the solution is forestalled, as the knob opens into a world of war, where Howl is transformed into a huge bird and surveys or wages battle against enemy forces, an incursion into the dangerous real of primordial beginnings, where impulses, destruction and creation rule. However, this space begins to dissolve at the same time as the history of the subject emerges and is dialectized. The war comes to Market Chipping, achieving symbolization, and shortly thereafter, Sophie finds out Howl's secret.

In a key moment in the movie, the girl travels through Howl's memories to the main event of his childhood; it is a scene laden with a great deal of anxiety, depicted by

the threatening vortex, the black mass of time, and the fact that Sophie's feet stick and sink in the mud while she is running towards Howl, making movement painfully slow and hindered.³⁰ The concept of constant change, and of factors influencing, constantly re-moulding or re-subjectifying the individual, is in fact clarified in the scene where Sophie learns the truth about Howl's and Calcifer's connection. Strikingly, Sophie is actually there as the child Howl catches the falling star and strikes the bargain, giving away his heart. Defying the time-space continuum, she shouts: "Howl! Calcifer! It's me Sophie! Wait for me! I promise I'll come back for you! Wait for me in the future!"³¹ and, for a split second, the young Howl seems to hear her. This bending of timelines shows how meeting Sophie has affected Howl not only in a linear way, but also by direct, painful contact with the most important element of his history as a subject, and also how events are only significant in retrospective. This conforms to the notion that our history is formed by an infinity of layers or connections, which crisscross and overlap each other to such an extent that no return to an original, basic truth about real motives and identities is possible. The only straight-forward occurrence is that of Howl's bird shedding its feathers and disappearing completely,³² prior to Howl receiving his heart back.

Similarly, in *Spirited Away*, the young girl helps Haku remember his history:

Chihiro: Listen, Haku. I don't remember it but my mother told me once when I was little I fell into a river. She said they'd drained it and built things on top. The river was called... Its name was the Kohaku River. Your real name is... Kohaku.
*Haku: Chihiro, thank you. My real name is Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi . I remember [...]*³³

This conversation triggers Haku's memories causing him to literally disintegrate into what first appear as shards of glass but later transform into drops of water, an event which is initially terrifying, as Haku was previously in his dragon-shape, carrying the girl on his back, and in mid-flight.³⁴ Additionally, the aesthetics in this instance are almost identical to those depicting the flock of magical paper birds, a possible hint to the re-integration in the Symbolic.

Both instances echo Lacan's observation that "Such is the fright that seizes man when he discovers the true face of his power that he turns away from it in the very act – which is his act – of laying it bare".³⁵ This is the moment when the ideal-ego is annihilated and the Imaginary is transcended, the instance of the emergence of truth, or the psychoanalytical subject.

Conclusion

To sum up, metamorphosis and language converge towards forcing the emergence of the psychoanalytical subject in the two male characters. The functions of metamorphosis are twofold: on the one hand, it illustrates the entrapment in the Imaginary order through Haku and Howl's perfect symbiosis with their ideal-egos, and underlines that these ideals are not the answer to the question of identity by condemning them to utter destruction; on the other hand, it achieves a parallel to the chain of signifiers, and suggests that identity is always multilayered and complex. However, this is manifestly true in the case of the male characters only. Chihiro and Sophie's cases are slightly different. If one considers Sophie's ideal-ego as the wiser grandmother, it is noteworthy that elements of this stage are kept in her final persona, most telling of which is the residue of the silver hair. Chihiro, as previously mentioned, cannot but retain "Sen" as an integral part of herself, as well.

As the next step, the subjects' attempts to resist analysis by trying to escape the

Symbolic order, materialized by the *name-of-the-father*, are overruled by the actions of the female characters: language, as the essential component of the Symbolic, is instrumental in determining the need of an exegesis of the forgotten, in order to bring the missing memory to light. However, in the cases of both Howl and Haku, there is no real answer to the fundamental question of the subject: “who am I?” or “where do I belong?” Even if the missing signifiers or the memories are uncovered and dialectized, the answer remains unsatisfactory. When glimpsing the fleeting moment of the emergence of the subject, the answer is clearly not that the final stage in which we see the two males – as regular humans – is the true one. Although the remembrance of the “real name” of Haku seems to provide the perfect solution, the significance of Chihiro’s words, according to which the river was dried and buildings were erected on top of it, cannot and should not be lost. Haku does not have the possibility to go back home, because his former place, the river bed, is now occupied by another entity. Since he actually is – or was – Kohaku River, what conclusions can be drawn about his identity? Surely, Haku is more than the subjectivity derived from his past, for were he just that, he would possess no subjectivity to speak of, or would no longer exist. Nothing is frozen in time, events have happened.

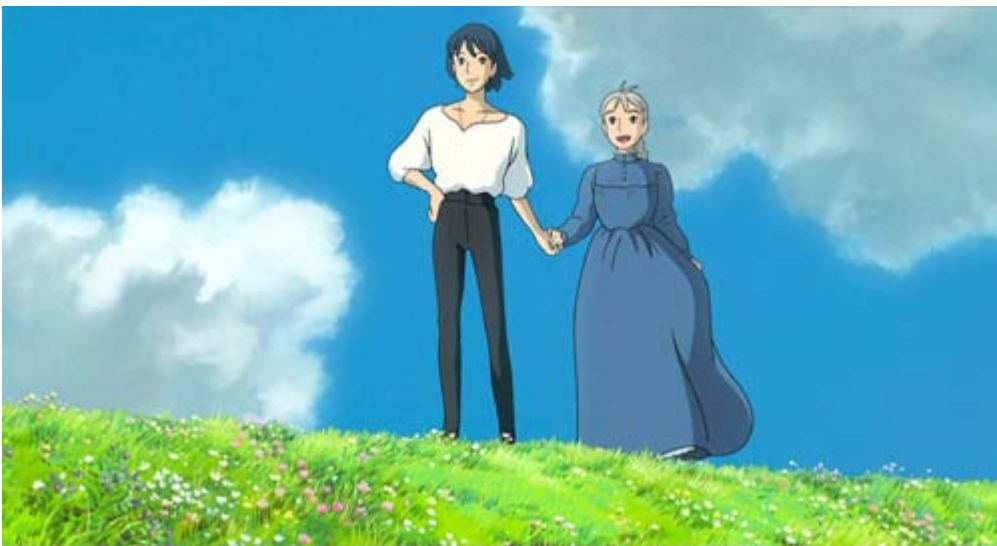
Similarly, it would be wrong to consider Howl’s receiving his heart as the filling of a lack: it is not that there is no lack, but that the lack has changed, as he displays emotions for Sophie several times before in the movie, by offering her presents and claiming that in her, he had finally found someone to protect³⁶ – and *die* for. To accept the first or the last persona of any of the characters, but particularly those of the male protagonists, as a finality, would blatantly ignore the free-play with the various stages achieved by metamorphosis and also contradict the narrative’s insistence to display mutability in the *dénouement*. Spatial movement is emphasized in *Howl’s Moving Castle* by Howl’s castle flying away in the end with the protagonists in it, and in *Spirited Away* by the girl running to her parents, and the whole family continuing their journey.

It is thus that the past is remembered, dialectized, and a type of conformation to the Symbolic is achieved, without the lack being completely filled. This not only reinforces the notion of identity as flux, or a chain of metamorphoses, contradicting the principles of initiation, but also conforms with Lacan’s concept of subjectivity. Thus, even if a momentary recapturing of the truth is achieved, there is always the danger that another new signifier can slip from the chain. This is the message that Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away* and *Howl’s Moving Castle* ultimately send out, integrating the two *anime* in a discourse on the nature of identity in postmodern reality.

Howl's Moving Castle



1. Howl as a young man with blond hair,
Sophie as a young girl with long brown hair



2. Howl as a young man with black hair, Sophie as a young girl with long grey hair /
body possibly of a 50 year-old, hinting at a transformation



3. Howl as a bird-man bearing angelic wings,
Sophie as a young girl with long silver hair



4. Howl as a defeated, frightening bird-man,
Sophie as a young girl with short silver hair

Spirited Away



5. Chihiro and Haku as a young boy



6. Haku as a slender dragon



7. Haku as an injured dragon after the attack of the paper-birds

Many grateful thanks to Lisa Schwer for her patient and kind help with the comparison of the Japanese original soundtrack and the English subtitles.

Footnotes

- [1](#) Cf. Jung, Carl Gustav (1990) "Archetypes of the collective unconscious" in *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, ed. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham et al., London: Routledge, 6.
- [2](#) Cf. Napier, Susan J. (2005) *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle. Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation*, New York: Macmillan.
- [3](#) Lacan, Jacques (2006) "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytical Experience" in *Écrits. The First Complete Edition in English*, transl. Bruce Fink, New York and London: Norton, 75-81.
- [4](#) Ibid. 79.
- [5](#) Lacan, Jacques (2006) "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation: 'Psychoanalysis and Personality Structure'" in *Écrits*, 543-575, esp. p. 565.
- [6](#) Ibid.
- [7](#) Lacan, Jacques (2006) "The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power" in *Écrits*, 534-5.
- [8](#) Lacan, Jacques (2006) "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis" in *Écrits*, 215.
- [9](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* (2006) DVD, dir. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli. All subsequent quotations will refer to this version of the movie. 1:49:59-1:50:10.
- [10](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* (a) 18 year-old: dark brown hair/rather plain features: 0:0:01-0:10:30; (b) 90 year-old: wrinkled and hunchbacked: 0:10:35-0:40:58, 0:41:18-0:45:36, 0:46:28-0:49:43, 1:00:56-1:00:57, 1:19:46-1:21:46; (c) 18 year-old: brown hair/nice features: 0:40:59-0:41:11, 1:00:44-1:00:47, 1:08:14-1:11:09; (d) 50-60 year-old: standing up straight: 0:45:37-0:46:27, 0:49:44-1:00:39, 1:00:58-1:08:13, 1:11:10-1:16:27, 1:16:37-1:17:44, 1:17:45-1:19:45, 1:21:52-1:27:37; (e) 18 year-old: long grey hair: 1:16:28-1:16:33, 1:17:45-1:19:45, 1:27:38-1:28:43; (f) 18 year-old: long silver hair: 1:28:44-1:35:19; (g) 18 year-old: short silver hair: 1:35:20-1:50:13.
- [11](#) *Spirited Away* (2007) DVD, dir. Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli. All further quotations will refer to this version of the movie. Haku as a dragon: 1:09:28-1:24:25, 1:47:10-1:49:26; Haku as a river: 1:49:29. Haku as a boy: remaining time.
- [12](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* : Howl as blond: 0:04:50-0:43:56, red-head: 0:43:58-0:44:33 black-haired: 0:44:37 onwards. Howl as a swallow-shaped bird: 0:38:34-0:39:17; a beautiful bird-man with archangel's wings: 1:28:13-1:30:24; a repulsive huge bird with just one leg: 1:43:58-1:45:13; a black shapeless monster: 1:31:50; Howl disintegrating: 1:45:14.
- [13](#) *The Art of Howl's Moving Castle*, 210. I quote from English subtitles provided by the movies for the Japanese versions, as they have proved to be in most cases almost exact translations. I will refer to the

Japanese words or terms used only when called for.

[14](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 0:43:57-0:46:56.

[15](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 0:44:44.

[16](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 0:40:04.

[17](#) Lacan, "Remarks on Daniel Lagache's Presentation", 567.

[18](#) Lacan, Jacques (2006) "The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud" in *Écrits*, 419.

[19](#) Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis" in *Écrits*, 464.

[20](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 0:23:13, 0:25:04.

[21](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 1:00:03-1:00:13.

[22](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 0:48:39-0:48:49.

[23](#) Miyazaki, Hayao (2001) "Chihiro's Mysterious Town. The Aim of the Film" in *The Art of Sen to Chihiro*, ed. Studio Ghibli, San Francisco: Viz Media, 15.

[24](#) *Spirited Away* 0:46:57-0:47:19 .

[25](#) *Spirited Away* 0:15:13-0:15:28.

[26](#) *Spirited Away* 1:09:28-1:11:13.

[27](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 0:30:14-0:31:08.

[28](#) Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech", 209.

[29](#) Wynne Jones, Diana (2001) *Howl's Moving Castle*, New York: Harper Trophy, 155-71.

[30](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 1:39:50-1:43:10.

[31](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 1:42:56-1:43:04.

[32](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 1:45:14-1:45:19.

[33](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 1:48:50-1:50:07.

[34](#) *Spirited Away* 1:49:24-1:49:34.

[35](#) Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech", 201.

[36](#) *Howl's Moving Castle* 1:30:11.

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