(AD SPOT SHOUT OUTS CRUNCHYROLL)

What's your *favorite* movie?
You don't have to answer right away.
I'll give you some time to think about it.
I love being asked that question, uh, and I think the
reason I *do* is because it's such an annoying thing to ask.
It is...obnoxious in its clarity. Its specificity.
It *immediately* puts you on guard.
In an instant, you're forced to weigh the value of all the art you've
experienced throughout your life. To appraise it down to the final grain for
another person to judge. The flash of guilt for considering the exclusion
of a childhood classic, The Aristocats maybe, or something a little
more esoteric. Milo & Otis. The insecurity of passing over the many
unambiguous monoliths of the medium to validate the quality of your
tastes to whoever asked. Vertigo. The 400 Blows. Ikiru. What if I choose
a musical? What does that say about me? A horror. Is that weird?
A romance! Do I seem lonely? How could anyone be expected to
appoint a diplomat for themselves, the sumnation of their life's
artistic affections up to that moment, in a single work?
They can't, honestly.
So people change the way they answer it.
Top 10 lists, 3x3s, fav 4s, and Top 5s abound.
A laxer framework, to be sure, one which has since
housed countless battles between friends and
internet strangers alike - across all arts.

(nightly yelling at eachother abt our top 5)

But what if we changed...the question?
What is your favorite movie - right now?
Just today. This hour.
What is, to you, as the newest version of yourself, an unassailable,
personal masterpiece - one that feels like it was made *just for you* -
to find peace in? One that allows you to become truly lost?

I wonder how different the answer would be.

Anyways I'm gonna talk about trains now
so put on your thinkin caps and strap in!

I'm really smart and this is
"Howl's Moving Castle - An Underrated Masterpiece"

(intro)
(When You're So Far Away - Mariya Takeuchi)

Alright, before getting into the whos whats and whys of
the flick at hand we gotta cover the man at its helm.
And, more *importantly*, how he got there.

Hayao Miyazaki was born in Bunkyo Ward, Tokyo in
1941 - the second of four sons. In 1944, just a year before
the bombing of Tokyo, his family fled to Utsunomiya City,
but after it was bombed as *well*, they settled in Kanuma City where
Miyazaki Airplane Corporation, ran by Hayao's uncle, was based.
Likely instilling in him his life-long *love* of flying, and unmistakably
instilling in him his life long *hate* for war. Not long after, he discovered the
world of manga, like Tetsuji Fukushima's Sabaku no Mao - The Devil
of the Desert - and just like that (snap) Hayao was hooked. Fast forward a
dozen or so years and the animation godfather-to-*be* enrolled in Gakushuin
University in the department of political economy - where he would major
in Japanese Industrial Theory and later graduate with a degree in Political
Science and Economics. The university didn't have a manga club, so he
joined the children's literature club instead - of which, he says, he
was sometimes the only member. With several thousands pages of
uncompleted stories and a poli sci degree under his belt, he left
college in 1963 and was hired on by Toei Animation the same year.
His first credited work was as an in-between artist on
Daisaku Shirakawa's film Wanwan Chushingura - Doggie March.
Within less than a year he led a major union dispute at the company
and became its labor union president - with his new friend Isao Takahata,
who he referred to as Paku-san, due to the sound he made when he ate bread
in the mornings, serving as his vice chairman. In 1965 they would work
on their first project together - The Great Adventure of Horus, Prince of the Sun.
Takahata directed while Miyazaki handled scene design and key animation.
1971, after completing work as a key animator for Hiroshi Shidara's
Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Miyazaki and Paku-san left Toei
in the dust to join A Production along with Yoichi Kotabe. And later
that year, Miyazaki embarked on his first location scouting trip with
the then-president of Tokyo Movie corporation. Destination - Sweden.
The work he'd flown out to scout for, Pippi Longstocking, never came
to fruition, nor did he even get to meet its author while he was there,
but the small villages and outdoor museums he'd visited struck him
so profoundly that the evokation of these environments would become
a prominent calling card in almost all of his work to follow. Kiki's
hometown, the village of Koriko, is literally the castle town of Visby on
the Swedish island of Gotland. Uh - and the city she decides to land in
is Stockholm. This also marked the beginning of Miyazaki adapting
classic literature to animation, something that would become a trend in
Japan at large, beginning with series like Moomin, Dororo, and
Miyazaki's very own Heidi, Girl of the Alps. Shout outs World
Masterpiece Theater. Anime Little Women went crazy, eat your heart out
Greta. '73 he blazes a trail abroad once more, to location scout for Heidi
in the hills of Switzerland, and in '75 he heads out again - this time to
Italy and Argentina - more or less completing his assembly of prevailing
external aesthetic influences. And finally, in the year 1979, the
world would see them coalesce in a feature length film.

(intro Lupin III: Castle of Cagliostro clip)
BRO LIKE IT'S SO *GOOD*!
Name a better feature length directorial debut than this.
Literally name one. What are you gonna? Oh is baby gonna say
Citizen Kane? Oh The Maltese Falcon? Shut up. Shut - shut your mouth.
Look at their little car. Look at the dog. Give me your phone.
Lupin the III: The Castle of Cagliostro isn't just one of the best
animated films ever made, it is one of the only animated films where
you can see the birth of a goat in real time. This is Michael in his
rookie season shit. Miyazaki's career should be examined
in two halves - The Pre and Post-Cagliostran Eras.
I *really* like it.
Even though the film itself wasn't a commercial success,
it cemented him as a director worth knowing *outside* of
television. 1981, Animage ran its first issue devoted to him,
titled "Hayao Miyazaki, World of Romance and Adventure",
and the following February, they published the first issue of
Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind. The editor who helped
facilitate their publication, Toshio Suzuki, would quickly become
the third piece to Studio Ghibli's holy trinity - serving either on the
production committee or as the main producer for virtually everything
the studio has ever released. '84, Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind,
the movie, takes theaters by storm - marking Hayao's first collaboration
with Joe Hisaishi. '85, Miyazaki, Takahata, and Suzuki found Studio
Ghibli. '86, Castle in the Sky. '88, My Neighbor Totoro.
'89, Kiki's Delivery Service. '92, Porco Rosso.
'97, Princess Mononoke. 2001, Spirited Away.
No misses.
And finally, in 2004, (gentle title card wooshy deal)
(inhale thru nose, like that kind of sniff u do)
the best animated movie of all time.
(hella heavy like stadium announcer echo)

Howl's Moving Castle is Miyazaki's 9th directed feature,
and the 14th to be released by Studio Ghibli, loosely based on
Diana Wynne Jones' novel of the same name - following Sophie,
a humble hat-maker with a lack of self confidence but an abundance
of idealism and Howl, a childish wizard whose talents demand of him
responsibilities he dare not accept - and who because of this - spends his life
fleeing them. *Loosely* being the operative word there because, much in
the the same way that Miyazaki had handled his previous adaptations,
this is by no means a faithful recreation of Jones' work. Rather it is Miyazaki's
own reconstruction of it - recycling only its base elements and discarding
the rest. Way fewer, way friendlier characters and environments,
but placed in a story with much, much, much more *gravity*.

And, I suppose there's no better place to start, than that story's beginning.

Howl's opens on an extreme-wide shot of a mountain, your typical opening
establishing shot, except it's almost entirely cloaked beneath a river of
dense, flowing fog. The first sound to greet us, after that of the low hum of
wind as it dashes across the mountain's spine, is that of machinery. The
exhalation of steam and the thunder of towering but clumsy steps,
devoid of any specific cadence or harmony. As the melange of sounds
draws nearer, a colossus emerges from the fog - lumbering
forward with as little visual composure as it has aural.
As the gloom disipates and our golem continues its march,
we cut to a close-up from its side - a tracking shot providing us
a much clearer view of its many mismatched parts, fastened
together by odd sized rivets and slopily laid bricks, held aloft
by gaunt metal legs. Cut again, we're even *closer* - the
titan's many independently moving pieces clattering and
wailing in full view. The way the camera interacts with
the moving castle in these first few shots, spoilers by the way,
this is the moving castle, feels less like the introduction of a
machine, and much more like the introduction of a character.

And, this is because in Miyazaki's cinematic language,
that is exactly what it is. Uh, let me explain.

Howl's Moving Castle's is a true blue Miyazaki opening,
something that I've come to refer to as the Miyazaki 3-Shot.
From Nausicaa to Moulin Rogue-but-with-planes, everything
dude drops opens with this same basic structure. Check it out.

Valley of the Wind opens with an extreme wide of a desolate wasteland,
with the only figures who don't belong to the natural environment
emerging center-frame from a sand storm in the distance.
Hold on their approach for about 6 seconds, then cut, second shot,
now we're up close and personal with that dang horseclaw's feet.
These are called horseclaws, by the way, I didn't know that, but apparently
in the manga they are called horseclaws. Cut again, and our third shot is
a closeup of our first character. Lord Yupa knows real Gs move in silence
like lasagna so he isn't saying a word or batting an eye, and if he or his
horseclaws *are* we're not seein it, which immediately communicates
to the audience that our trio have logged in to the Danger Zone.

Castle in the Sky, same thing - opens with that young EWS. This time a pan.
Second shot, we cut in close to whatever disrupted the frame in the
first one, this time it's an airship, and with our cut to the third, Miyazaki
introduces us to Dola's gang. Due to the ensemble dynamic we aren't given a
medium-close like our boy LY, but we are given just as much *context*.
The shot begins on the Tiger Moth's tail, emblazoned with a skull, the
universally agreed upon symbol for pirates, and as the band begins to flood
out of the cabin, a siren and the team's body language makes it perfectly
clear that whatever our corsairs of the sky are *seeking*, they've just found.

Totoro, you know the deal.
We open with an establishing shot of a field, then a subject pierces the static frame from stage right. Second shot, like usual, we're getting Closer like Ne-Yo. We can infer that whoever this *is* is settling down somewhere new. And with our third, go figure, we're introduced to our first characters. Mary Kate and Ashley are in the back, but mom's nowhere in sight and big sis is the one disbursing the sweets - a subtle first pour of the film's foundational emotional dynamic.

Kiki's, I bet you can guess.
Open wide, rotate, close, then close-up.
Our first three shots leave us certain of one thing and it's that this gamer girl's fixin to get the heck out of Dodge.

4 films in, Hayao's developed a pretty reliable formula.
So he starts mixing it up.

Porco Rosso, we start like usual.
Film opens wide on the sky over the Adriatic Sea, framed on 3 sides by cliffs and the trees that live atop them. Camera tilts down until it comes to a rest on the subject(s) that had breached the frame. This is the first time Miyazaki introduces a character and a vehicle in the same opening without the character actually being in it, but he maintains the visual balance of the formula by using their opposing edges to center them in the frame and having them enter it at virtually the same time. Cut to shot number 2, its pan beginning *here* and ending *here*, Marco is implicitly bound to the Curtiss R3C floating by his feet by the line drawn between them and his face is obscured from our view because it isn't of any great importance. The third shot is where things really get interesting though. Instead of cutting to a close-up of our character, as he's done previously, Miyazaki cuts to a close-up of what this symbiotic relationship represents - what our character *pursues*. Put succinctly, a life of freedom.

Miyazaki would begin to both rely on and reply to the language he'd developed in the beginnings of his films - to create a dialogue with the viewer by playing on the subconscious expectations he had nurtured.

Mononoke and Ponyo's openings both rely on it to expedite the delivery of their message to the audience; they're both still 3 shot punch ins from an extreme wide to a relative close but there aren't any characters or objects for the camera to focus on. The only thing occupying each of the 3 opening shots in either film is nature because nature is the essential character of them.

Spirited Away, alternatively, opens with a response *to it*; a slick fake out and reversal by way of opening on an extreme closeup of nature - a boquet of flowers - and then pulling them away to reveal a natural landscape, but one that is out of focus, and separated from us by a window. The second and third shot are, this time, further away than the first, and all three of them utilize this contrast between the flowers, the nature they belong to, and the deviation from expectation, as an illustration of Chihiro's disillusionment with life at the moment and the anxiety of not belonging wherever she's moving to. The opening doesn't feel like it belongs - either.

The Wind Rises, same as the first 4.
First shot, second shot, third.
What's the movie about?
The pursuance of dreams.
What's the third shot?
You already know.

This is the filmmaking equivalent of how, like, 80% of Pharell beats start with that little 4 count.

(Mr. Me Too - Clipse)
(Beyonce - Kitty Cat)
(I Gotcha - Lupe Fiasco)

So, back to Howl's Moving Castle.
Miyazaki utilizes this cinematic language that he'd developed to usher us into this film in a remarkable way. Its opening 3 shots establish its setting, fundamental theme, its quintessential vehicle, *and* a delineation of the film's main cast's ambitions via the subversion of the character introduction close-up on the third shot - simultaneously. What Miyazaki had previously accomplished in the openings of 4 very different films, he's able to concentrate and execute in just 1, precisely *because* he'd done these each separately, previously.

We cut back to an extreme wide, the fog subsiding to reveal radiant, rolling hills of green pasture flanked by snow-capped peaks. As the moving castle continues its trek through the frame, the sounds of the bells of the sheep become incoprorated into its symphony of bellows and creeks, as do the birds, as do the strings as they slowly fade in to complete the soundscape. The shepherd waves to it as it passes, and with our next shot - a calm, bright blue sky, shapes kept deliberately ambiguous as to whether they are steel or feathered gliding across the cloud-covered frame - the strings withdraw, and a single piano softly takes their place as the title card appears. The characteristic swell that accompanies many of Miyazaki's film's title cards is subverted entirely, instead being delayed until its first reprisal - titled Scroll Through The Sky - when Sophie and Howl first meet. The music is once again accompanied by the arrythmic heaving of machinery, this time a train, and as the strings return, taking its place, we're taken into the shop opposite the tracks and an older woman enters the doorway to introduce our protagonist, Sophie, by name, and -

OH MY GOD MIYAZAKI BRIEF ENCOUNTER'D US!!!!!
OH MY (LAUGHING) WHAT?!?!

It's, okay, it's a little shaky, I admit, because, uh, the in medias res of
Howl's isn't really given its let's go back, back to the gap moment until
like 10-ish minutes before its ending, so it's not, in a spiritual sense,
necessarily in medias res, but like technically it is, and like,
the idle gossip of the shop begins after Sophie's introduction,
not before as it does with Laura, and it trades the tension of adultery
for the burden of war, but...it's the train. It's the castle. Uh, David Lean's Brief
Encounter is brilliant, for a lot of reasons, you should watch it if you haven't,
but the one that always sticks out to me, the most, is his use of steam locomotives,
their arrivals and departures, to both bring its lovers together in the first
place and represent the explosive, impetutous nature *of* their love. Every
appearance of a train in the film, bookmarks another chapter in the development of
their romance, until the very last departure marks its end. The film contends that
above all else, love is accidental and out of the blue. It contains what is surely
one of the most romantic exchanges ever put to a screen. Alec, Laura's love
interest in the film, the both of them having up to this point spent their time
together rather innocently, just as friends, is explaining his vocation for
preventative medicine to her, how the coal mines of the town they met in help
him study, and there's a point in the middle of his ethusiastic rambling where
her eyes widen like she's just come to this world-ending realization and
then...there it is. She remarks how he looked like a little boy just then,
and they both realize, within the same instant, what's happened, and
there's nothing either of them can do about it. They're in love.
In this specific respect, this precise delivery of the realization of love as a
car accident happening in front of you, I don't think an animated film managed
to capture it nearly as *well*, as *honestly*, until Howl's. So it's incredibly fitting
that it would also employ the same motif for it. Love, by accident, is the
penultimate agent for change in Howl's Moving Castle. This is expressed,
first, by the clumsiness, the coarseness with which the vehicle appointed to
represent it - traverses its world. This, again, is an inclusion of Miyazaki's.
In Jones' writing, the Kingdom of Ingary, where our story takes place, hasn't
yet reached the industrial age - so no planes, trains, or automobiles -
the castle's movement is never described or given a mechanical source.
And second, by the immediate contradiction to Sophie's expectations,
when she and Howl meet. Due to the greater conflict being war rather
than love within constraints, the quarel between would-be sweethearts
juxtaposed against Laura and Alec in the opening of Brief Encounter is
replaced by Sophie's sisters exclaiming that they can see Howl's castle in
the distance just after she resolves to stay and work while the others leave.

Two really crucial introductions happen here,
before, uh, Sophie and Howl's.

First, the development of Howl and Sophie's leitmotif.
The strings, once again, are replaced with a piano, the second note
of the same melody we heard during the film's title card, striking in sync
with the cut to reaction shot. We haven't even met Howl yet, but the mention
of his name alone, already evokes this specific musical idea. But pay attention
to what is actually said, while it plays. How *we're* introduced to the idea of Howl
by the other employees of the shop. Instantly, what we understand from the opening
to be a beneavolent presence, is met with panic. Certainly he shouldn't be
so close. He disappeared into the fog. Only to hide from the soldiers.
Did you hear what happened to Martha? They say he tore out her heart.
All uttered as casually as one would say anything else, in spite of the fact that
Miyazaki's just shown us, this perception of Howl carries with it a very real lethality.
The carelessness with which this is delivered, in combination with its brevity,
makes it an incredibly easy interaction to assign almost no weight to beyond
its use of establishing that Howl is physically close to where Sophie is.
With their departure, the train passes again, and Sophie leaves - as does the
melody. For the next minute and a half straight, Miyazaki screams at us in
7,000 point Impact font that the previous interaction we'd heard was
not, actually, weightless at all. The second introduction he'd made - was
propoganda. Inexorably tied to the romance of our protagonists.
Speaking of which, here's Howl! Just in time to make sure
the soldiers we'd seen paraded in town 20
seconds ago don't, uh, assault Sophie in an - alley.

As a side note I think Howl is maybe the best designed human
character in a Miyazaki film for his wardrobe alone. I mean,
peep how he comes into frame, we don't even see his
face yet but you already know how he's comin.

(render of Howl in this outfit w Lil Tracy - bacteria first 3 lines playing)
(alternatively use the yess sirrrrrr yes sirrrrrrr vid)

Bro said he's gettin fits off whether the kingdom wants him dead or not.
And honestly? You gotta respect it.

Anyways, Howl throws the reverse card at them, and we're on our
merry way - except - uh oh! Our studly savior is in hot water as well.
The leitmotif's instrumentation has developed from a single piano into
an orchestra, first gently ambling along with the pair and then taking on
a more hastened, perilous tone as the Witch of the Waste's henchman
begin to close in around them. And what follows, is, for my money,
the best Hisaishi swell in Miyazaki's entire body of work.

(pway cwip)

Not only is this one of the most disarming and enchanting moments, like, ever, it is also the clearest illustration drawn of the moral disparity within its world and within Miyazaki's world view. As Howl and Sophie saunter through the air, every kindness that he speaks from now until the moment he leaves her on Cesari's balcony, slowly dispels the malicous beliefs those waltzing beneath them hold towards him. And her subsequent conversation with Lettie, her sister, immediately doubles down on this contrast. Miyazaki allows for no idle time to pass, there *is* no ambiguity. Lettie's question to Sophie, "Are you sure he wasn't a wizard?", is countered by Sophie simply remarking "He was so kind. He rescued me." If it was Howl, Lettie continues, he would've eaten her heart right up. To these people, these two things are mutually exclusive. There can't be nice wizards or witches unless they're firmly under the kingdom's thumb, and this goes especially for those who don't support its beligerant militarism. If who the state sees as the enemy is actually harmless, simply wishing to live free of conflict, then that would mean she's wrong. And her countless wealthy consumers clad in oppoulent military regalia are perpetuating violence, profiting from and being *celebrated* for perpetuating violence, over a lie.

And that could never happen in a Kingdom like Ingary.

(breath in, almost slow gasp)

Oh wait!

(cut off in edit w/ fast next line)

Anyways!
Sophie heads back to Lids and The Witch of the Wastes pays her a visit because she suspects her of ssstealin her man. I'm like, in love with this moment, because, usually when Miyazaki introduces his initially predominant antagonist that becomes a supporting character half way through the film, because he literally always does that, there's a clear conflict that they're engaged in that has nothing to do *with* harming the protagonist. They're never fundamentally unkind people, they're just desparate. So it's hilarious that in Howl's Moving Castle our opening antagonist just pulls up on Sophie with the most "I am a villain" fit possible and proceeds to fuck her whole life up for a reason we not only understand is irrational, but that Sophie doesn't understand - at all. She doesn't know that her henchman were the ones following Howl, only we do. This is just a stranger she's heard about going "I think I will cause problems on purpose" and then *leaving* for 40 minutes of screen-time. It's perfect. Which brings me to my next point on my big, big list of why Howl's Moving Castle is the best Miyazaki film and everyone is wrong except me.

It's like - genuinely funny.

Uh, this isn't a knock at his other movies, obviously, I love them all, but, due to either tone or target demographic depending on the work, there aren't exactly a lot of opportunities for laughs throughout Miyazaki's filmography. At most, we get "cute-funny", as is the case with films like Totoro or Ponyo, where the actions of an exagerated animal character make you giggle because it's cute, or brief moments of extreme visual comedy like in Porco Rosso, Castle in the Sky, and Spirited Away. Quick, slap-stick, I can't believe that happened laughs. Even then, these are rare occurences, so his films rely almost solely on their optimism, color palette, and music to pump that sweet serotonin into our tired tired brains. And that's not a problem, because he and the teams who created them are so talented *at* evoking happiness through these other means that comedy writing, you know, situational, conflict based comedy, isn't usually vital to their execution. But that couldn't work with Howl's Moving Castle. W*ithout* these interactions, you know, without the main villain's goofy dog, Heen, being mistaken as Howl in disguise for like 7 full minutes, without Sophie and The Witch of the Waste's stair bit or their ridiculous introduction to eachother, without Howl's literal meltdown over Sophie mixing up his dyes, or his impression of the King being extremely eloquent and well composed only for the actual King to enter moments later and reveal to us that he is a loud, brash idiot, all while everyone in the room already knew he *wasn't* the King and this is immediately following us and Sophie realizing Heen *wasn't* Howl, without the dry sarcasm of Calcifer, or the childish goofiness of Markl, or the exasperation of Sophie with all three of them, the tonal balance Howl's manages to achieve would all but fall apart. It was Mel Brooks who said "Tragedy is if I cut my finger, comedy is if I fall in an open sewer and die." and I think that expresses not just the innate charm of severe circumanstaces in comedy but the innate charm of comedy in severe circumstances. Howl's being much more deliberately funny, containing actual interactions and plot beats made to be comedic, is because Howl's Moving Castle is his most undiminished and straight forward expression of how not fucking cool things are, responding to a specific, real world cataclysm happening at the time of its creation. In terms of darkness, *this* is where Miyazaki reached his maximum depth, and these fragments of light are the glue by which the vessel is held together.

So, let's rip a bandaid off, shall we?

Howl's Moving Castle is about the Iraq war.
That isn't an opinion. Here's Miyazaki saying why
he didn't accept his Oscar for Spirited Away.
He detests right wing governments, which should be
obvious from his work, including the leader of his own,
who only seems vaguely liberal to Americans in comparison to
the triple S Devil May Cry combo of violent, bigoted sociopaths
that have ran our country since its inception. And he's more than equipped
to express why, hence my specification of his background of study and
his victimhood at the hands of our empire's injudicious slaughter of
civilians which he criticizes so precisely in defense of those who
weren't given the same chance. The King is George W. Bush.
Madam Sulliman is a mixture of Dick Cheiney and Donald Rumsfeld.
We're never told what the name of the neighboring kingdom that Ingary wages
its violence against is because it doesn't really matter. We know what it
really is. Another decision of Miyazaki's. It has a name in the book, but in
the book the issue of war is only peripherally referred to. Howl's disappearances
are because in the book, he *is* a womanizer. His summons is to simply find the
king's missing brother. The rumors about him are spread by himself. The reasons
he avoids his quote "responsibility to his kingdom" are because he's fickle and
self-absorbed. The changes made in the film, to soften Howl's demeanor, to make
him resent war so deeply, and, instead, let the perception of him by the people of
Ingary serve as a meditation on state disseminated misinformation to justify abuse
at its hands and the way it contorts otherwise well-meaning people into paranoid
and hateful nationalists, evermore entrenched in the belief that their
vitriolic world views are normal, even righteous, are *inspired*.
And agonizingly prescient 16 years later.

In spite of this, somehow, it is still an extraordinarily comforting film to watch.

Calcifer is, without a hint of exageration, the best non-human
sidekick in the history of film. I mean, every good adventure has one,
right? Why do you think Torchlight slaps as hard as it does? Because
it's fun to play? Uh, no, how about because I can get a cat and make it wear a
fucking backpack? It's basic storytelling. Calcifer fulfills this same party role,
so to speak, and was similarly changed to become a much warmer presence in
the film. Something that compliments his existence as a *literal fire*, pretty well.
I think what allows Calcifer to so quickly endear himself to us, though,
is that he exists at the crossroads of two of humanity's most beloved
storytelling tropes. One half Androcles and the Lion, the interdependent
relationship between a human and a beast, typically one they've saved who
then comes to their rescue in return at a later point in the story. Basically that
Pokemon episode where Bruno tames an Onix after pulling a Sandslash out
of its side but like boring and Roman and historically significant or whatever.
If you've seen How to Train Your Dragon you get the gist.
And the other half, the theft of fire - probably most popularly known in the
West as Hesiod's Myth of Prometheus. An allegory meant to concecrate
humanity's everlasting hunger for knowledge and the mastery of our own fates,
no matter the cost. For his crime of stealing fire from Zeus and delivering it to
the humans in a giant fennel stalk, the titan Prometheus was bound to a rock,
where every day an Eagle, the symbol of Zeus, would eat his liver, only for it
to regenerate at night and be eaten again the next morning. In Ancient Greece, the liver
was often thought to be the center for human emotion, so Prometheus' punishment
adapted to modern poetic language would likely depict him losing his
heart, in exchange for the key to unlock humanity's potential, instead.
The combination of two of our most captivating tropes, packaged as
the universal illustration of coziness with an extremely cute face and the
characterization of every cartoon cat that has ever existed who is then
given the ability to wield magic, cook the best looking breakfast I have
ever seen, and pilot a *castle*. Hayao can't help but put up 3s.

Howl's Moving Castle's score is brilliant as well.
Joe Hisaishi's compositions perfectly capture Howl's being not only
Miyazaki's most unabashedly romantic film but his most extreme,
both in its crests and its depressions. He reprises and develops upon Howl
and Sophie's leitmotif in 16 of the score's 26 tracks, and those which lie
under its darker moments are *incredibly* intense and disorienting in
contrast to its predominantly gentle and whimsical soundscape.
Uh, the first example of this contrast, actually being the second
song heard in the film - the *only* piece of diegetic music in Howl's.
Sophie leaves her hat shop, and after a short bus ride into town,
just before she's accosted by 2 of the 4 Beatles, she's met with the
aforementioned parade for Ingary's military. Its music bears no resemblence
to the instrumentation we'd just been ushered into the film by and its just
slightly uncomfortably loud horn section, its crashing cymbals, and its garish
strings and flutes arpegiating beneath the fanatical chanting of the crowd along
with Sophie's determination to pay no attention to it make for a genuinely
unsettling musical identity. This doesn't feel normal, no matter how much
everyone here thinks, or wants to think, that it is. It's not explicitly dark, as the
remaining pieces of the score pertaining to Ingary's hawkishness and the
damage it causes are, but, it establishes, immediately after we're introduced
to Howl and Sophie's theme, that whatever this is - contradicts it.
And as the film progresses, as the malevolent nature of this power
structure is revealed to Sophie, what were once subtle imperfections
on the surface unravel to become horrifying shreeks of string sections
racing through our ears and completely overwhelming whatever light
atmosphere may have existed prior to this moment. There can be
no mistake made as to who the source of strife in this world is.
This goes a long way in The Witch of the Waste's early development in particular.
Given her limited screentime and how much of her arc depends on the
moment following her reintroduction which then immediately triggers
Madam Sulliman going mask off to which Sophie responds with her
"you looked like a boy just then" Brief Encounter love awakening,
a lot is riding on the brief window of time the characters spend with her
or speaking of her before this 50 minute mark lightswitch, so while the Kingdom
of Ingary carries this very much separate aural footprint, The Witch of
the Wastes - though still mischievous - is portrayed, musically,
by the same sounds that Howl, Sophie, and the rest are.

Again, the true enemies in all of Miyazaki's work are never the disorganized
criminals or desparate outcasts that his secondary antagonists are comprised of,
but the systems that deliberately perpetuate the conditions which create them.

(porco rosso better pig than fascist clip)

I think its visuals are crazy cool too.
Howl's Moving Castle truly is a culimation of
everything Miyazaki had made leading up to it.
Nearly all of the environments were inspired by
his trips abroad for previous projects. This shot in
its opening sequence looks more like the Swiss landscapes of
Heidi, Girl of the Alps, than anything he'd directed since Cagliostro.
The fields of flowers surrounding star lake, Howl's secret garden where he grew up,
are expressive of those in Sweden, which Kiki begins her film laying atop of.
The city of Porthaven is a mixture of coastal villages in Italy and Argentina,
trips he'd taken for Porco Rosso and his scene design work on Takahata's
3,000 Leagues in Search of Mother. And fittingly, Market Chipping and
the Royal Capital of Kingsbury, are an amalgam of French, German,
and Austrian architecture - inspired by the Alsace region of France,
which he traveled to for this film. The last he would direct based
somewhere other than Japan. Howl's was produced digitally,
but, because it's Miyazaki, everything from its backgrounds to
its characters was drawn and painted by hand, then scanned,
then manually retouched after it had been digitally assembeled
to make sure that not even a single frame felt inhuman or artifical.
Its use of color, its lush greens, brilliant blues, smoldering reds,
and tenebrous blacks paint an almost tangibly lucid spectrum of emotion.
The scenes of Howl fighting the many wizards and witches who serve
Ingary are suffocating, their depiction of darkness and heat so exquisite
that there is a palpable sense of relief when Miyazaki cuts away from them.
Every environment, every room is exhaustively unique and ornate.
The scope of the detail in Howl's bedroom, alone, is like genuinely insane.
No two places, not even exterior shots within the wastes, feel similar.
And this allows its revisitation of locations to feel even more substantial.
The interior of the moving castle, both pre and post transformation,
is one of the most relaxing environments rendered in ink.
It begs to be lived in. Every environment in the film does.
That's what makes their destruction, even the mere presence of
warships within them, feel so immediately, so oppressively bleak.
And, the castle itself, as contrasted against the palace of Kingsbury
and Howl's counterpart, is a brilliant expression of the film's main theme.
Appearances are often misleading, but substance never is.
People are messy, and multifaceted, and weird, all with our own
blemishes and scars and aches and mistakes and traumas, but within whatever shell
we've been given we're capable of fostering so much love and we're still able
to ignite and sustaine that love even after anguish or fear has stolen it from us
or stripped us of the armored edifices we spend so long cobbling around our anxious
selves. Howl's Moving Castle is the breadth of the human experience on
four goofy little legs, and I love it. And I love the characters who reside in it.
I love how effortlessly it builds, and continues to build, this eclectic
family of what the kingdom rejects. A cursed, lovestruck hatter who
doesn't believe her life was meant for excitement or love, but shows
such compassion to everyone she meets, **a grandma whose vindiction
was sapped away with much of her strength**, but whose knowledge
of magic is still only matched by the boyish radical who's in *love* with the
hatter and still cuts his hair like he's Sulliman's apprentice, whose charm
is only matched by the luminance of his ideals, a child wizard whose
unconvincing disguise and inability to cloak his excitement carries such a
playful energy into every scene he's a part of, a scarecrow with a turnip
for a head who, along with Heen the dog, carries greater narrative significance
in the last minutes of the film than almost any other character's, and a fire demon
who spends so much of his time making snide remarks and complaining that he
hardly realizes he's come to love his life with the family that has assembled around
him. I love that Howl's fight in many ways echos Ashitaka's, from Princess
Mononoke. The physical reflection of their respective hate of violence and the pain
it causes them to contribute to its venomous cycle. I love the confidence and the
joy that Sophie finds in herself as she grows and realizes her potential, and I love
that her curse is so cliche that the secret to breaking it is simply falling in love.
All the best ones are. I love that their love trascends both of the curses they bear,
even prior to their breaking, allowing Sophie to forget the aches and pains
she'd felt at the age she was cursed to live as like half way through the film,
gradually returning to her form as the intensity of her heart gows,
and Howl to retain his humanity longer than either he or Calcifer could have
predicted. In the moment when Howl is leaving to protect the castle from the
bombs falling overhead, and Sophie pleads in vain for him to stay,
because she's the reason he won't, Miyazaki manages to so perfectly capture
the simultaneous ecstacy of loving someone with your whole heart
and the paralyzing terror of knowing that that person loves you back.
I love that its sound design and Miyazaki's framing of the different
vehicles within Howl's so clearly separates artistitic feets of engineering,
from the brutal apparatuses of war. The castle, the train, the cars,
every vessel of peace has its own idiosyncratic symphony
of heaves and grates that harmonize with the nature that surrounds them
and with the score of the film, as they underscore the flowering
romance of our protagonists, while every warship carries a tiresome,
steady hum. A tone devoid of life because they exist only to end it.

And Miyazaki's rumination on this, the ease with which their crews were consumed or mislead by malice, gives the film's appeal to mercy all the more weight. Its commentary on the severity and the permanence of the transformation wizards and witches undergo to fight, their total loss of self if prolonged, is an allegory for the PTSD that has torn its way through both kingdoms in the aftermath. In his book Starting Point, Miyazaki describes how much the atmosphere of war-time Japan scared him not just because of the destruction it had wrought and how much his people, innocents with no say, were made to suffer in return by the US' hand, but by how easily he felt he would have been radicalized by the same imperial propaganda had he been born only a little earlier. How effortless it could have been to shape his compassion into prejudice. And that's a really scary admission to make. He describes Bush as "a man possessed by the ghost of John Wayne, telling him that 'this is the way a real man should act'". Over a million civilians blood on his hands, for weapons he knew were never there. In his article The Psychology of Propaganda, Dr. Raymond Dodge writes to us of WWI, 100 years in the future; "Paper bullets, according to Mr. Creel, won the war. But they have forever disturbed our peace of mind. The war is long since over, all but saying so; but our consciousness of the immanence of propaganda bids fair to be permanent." He goes on to say, "A cartoon discloses the anatomy of propaganda more completely than any other kind.". I think Howl's Moving Castle is an irrefutable validation of this.

(don't pay attention that's propaganda clip)
(clip of newspaper w gwamma)

I really love Howl's Moving Castle and I really do think it is Miyazaki's best work. A lot of friends I talk to about Miyazaki's top 5, always seem to mention Howl's is one of his weakest, and it drives me crazy hence the title. It's underrated relative to where I see it. The top rung. Lately, though, I've been watching it a lot. I mean, it's always been a comfort film for me, but this year I've just...watched it a whole lot. I think when we're in pain or overwhelmed we either look for an escape, to feel like we aren't in the life we're in, or we seek a reflection of that life to meditate on. To seek therapy for our problems by seeing them cast in a different light. It's just that it's such a reassuring movie, you know? In spite of its subject matter being so grim, it's still Miyazaki's most optimistic work. The Center for Public Integrity estimated that in a two-year period the Bush administration made 935 different false statements about Iraq's alleged capability to pose a threat to us. On 9/11, Rumsfeld famously demanded the National Security Council give him a good enough reason not to strike Iraq in relatiation even though they had no connection to it. The list of war crimes they paved the way for is too innumerable to fathom, but, in *Howl's* love changes even the orchestrators of its strife. Turnip reveals himself to be a lost prince of the neighboring kingdom and Sulliman is reminded of her heart by seeing that Howl never truly lost his. They decide to stop the war, which she admits was without reason, and the conflict is just - resolved. That's it. There's no weird bittersweet compromise where the protagonists return to their mundane lives, or, you know, like one of them dies, or fate ordanes that they must stay apart to maintain a balance or whatever. It's like, it's like Brief Encounter if it ended the way everyone wants Brief Encounter to end, right? In The Mood For Love, Lost In Translation, La La Land, whatever. And, you know, maybe it's better that it doesn't, maybe that's what gives it some of its brilliance, is that it can't last, but I'm just so tired of that. Because when the movie ends, maybe the administration responsible never faces any kind of even vague repercussion outside of a fucking Green Day single. And maybe the one in place now is just as barbaric, so much so that it's currently threatening to imprison members of the International Criminal Court for even trying to inquire about those war crimes. Maybe its response to a global pandemic was to inspire paranoia about the validity and severity of its every aspect, to further propogandize its citizenry of anxious, hyper individualist nationalists and now 164,000 are dead with no end in sight and the observations of the world's scientists are blasphemy to the king. Maybe we aren't just living in the same world as the Sea of Decay but we are residing on its banks - and the tide's coming in. Maybe when you wake up and try to order food so you can avoid potentionally exposing yourself to the virus your kingdom will allow to kill 1,300 of its people today it can't be picked up because the hands of the king shot a man in his chest for having a mental breakdown in front of the restaurant. They could've just tazed him, but they don't care - and everyone knows it except the people who don't want to. Because that would mean they're wrong. And that could never happen in a Kingdom like Ingary. Maybe the virus costed your job, maybe your credit rating dropped, maybe you lost a friend, maybe you even lost your Sophie or your Howl. So you just - immerse yourself in a world where that doesn't happen. Where the people who shape the reality you're visiting magically develop moral compasses and then follow them to make decisions that are kind and inspire kindness. Where you still have whatever it is you lost, or at least have grown past the hurt of losing it.

But that isn't life.

And, I think I'm ready to stop watching it, soon.

Miyazaki once said of his work;
"My foundation is this: I want to send a message of cheer to all those wondering aimlessly through life."

Howl's is undoubtedly that.

It doesn't just show us an alternate reality to criticize ours. It shows us what ours can come to be.

As we arrive at its end, their moving castle is rebuilt,
ascending from its ruins to soar into a brighter future than
the present they're leaving behind as the visual dichotomy from
their initial convergence is given its encore. The outfits of our
protagonists exchanged for ones which represent cheerfulness,
love, and hope. I think everyone needs an escape sometimes.
A weighted blanket in the form of images and sounds.
And if you've been spending more time in yours than usual this year,
I feel you. You should know that no matter how corny it feels to watch
The Office over and over again instead of something new,
I understand the comfort of knowing that Pam Beesly is gonna
turn out fine. It's suplimentary to the uncertainty that you will.

But you will.

Fragments of light, right?

When I was 8, my favorite movie was A Goofy Movie
because my dad lived a thousand miles away and I missed him.

When I was 13 it was The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King
because I wanted to feel brave and well liked like Gimli.

My favorite movie...right now...is Howl's Moving Castle.

Because I needed it to be.

What's yours?

(outro - The Good Life - Sacha Distel)