

Ada Wells Memorial Prize 2024

By Hermione Bowles

“The ability to see ourselves in the lives of others is arguably what defines the value of film to society. Debate this proposition in relation to two feature films. The films you choose to discuss may be popular contemporary films, such as Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* or Greta Gerwig's *Barbie*, European films such as François Truffaut's *400 Blows* or Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, anime classics such as Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, or New Zealand films such as *Waru* directed by eight Māori women or Taika Waititi's *Boy*. You may have your own favorite films that speak to the topic, and we welcome your original ideas!”*

Cinema is a sensory gateway into other worlds and the lives that occupy them. It becomes a meaning maker where, as audiences, we seek to understand why a film is made, what story it is trying to tell, and how we can apply this to our lives. While film is a powerful tool for understanding oneself, it more importantly compels us to engage in empathy and enlightenment by introducing us to new experiences or perspectives of familiar ones. Children's cinema simultaneously invites us to search for foreign and familiar perspectives, either as children learning about the adult world, or adults comprehending the child's mind. The 2008 Japanese anime *崖の上のポニョ* (*Ponyo*), created and directed by Hayao Miyazaki, and the 2016 claymation, *Ma vie de Courgette* (*My Life as a Courgette*), directed by Claude Barras and co-written by Céline Sciamma, explore complex themes of love, grief, and familial bonds from a child's perspective.

Ponyo, a charming interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*, follows five-year-old Sōsuke, who discovers a fish escaping her father's control. The fish, named Ponyo, becomes enamoured with Sōsuke and uses her father's magic to return to him as a human, causing an imbalance in nature and creating a tidal wave that floods his town. The two utilise their love, magic, and imagination to restore world balance and grant Ponyo's desire to remain on land as a human with Sōsuke. In *My Life as a Courgette*, inspired by Gilles Paris' novel, *Autobiographie d'une Courgette*, Icare, who prefers the name Courgette, accidentally kills his mother and is sent to an orphanage where he must confront grief and bullying from the other children. Over time, Courgette learns to love and finds family through shared experiences and empathy toward the other children who are just as traumatised by their parents' loss, abuse, or abandonment.

These films are comforting and confrontational in their exploration of a child finding their way through a foreign world. They highlight the value of film to society, where the magic may begin upon seeing oneself accurately represented on screen but flourishes as we are changed by knowledge, a shift in perspective, and a hopeful glimpse into the eyes of a child.

Cinema stereotypes the child's character as innocent and imaginative, where each burden is simply overcome with overwhelming love or hope, something that Dominic Lennard argues is to “reassure ourselves that all is well if these things are intact” (qtd. in Batkin 18). In this sense, we search for ourselves in the innocent child to find these feelings of hope, safety, and love and seek the belief that they prevail, no matter the obstacle. Many films seek to protect children from the physicality of the adult space by forming a new world to suit their perceived

innocence. Such worlds are manifestations of our past selves where filmmakers capture a space that combines stereotypes of a child with personal experiences and reassurances that if there cannot be goodness in our world, there must at least be goodness in theirs. As adults, we are forbidden to enter these spaces the same (Batkin 2) because of our growth and knowledge that grants us new perspectives of the same place. When watching a children's film, we simultaneously view these worlds through our childhood and adult selves, a feeling of nostalgia we seek to protect.

Additionally, we absorb the inner world of filmmakers, who share their understanding of childhood to convey a different experience (de Leeuw et al. 481). In *My Life as a Courgette*, the diversity in the orphans' traumatic experiences invites many opportunities to see ourselves in the film and to understand how children from different backgrounds interact in this microcosmic world. Simon, for example, appears angry and takes his frustration out on the other children. His inability to control his situation drives him to try and control the other children, which his dominant character does through bullying. Camille is a quieter character. She seeks defiance through kindness that combats Simon's authority. Whilst both characters come from extreme and unrelatable situations, their archetypes and social standings in their world seek attention from like-minded children (and, inherently, adults). They depict how Barras and Sciamma understand how children operate, perhaps drawing from their own experiences alongside the novel.

Unlike the hyperrealism in *My Life as a Courgette*, Hayao Miyazaki's world transcends time and physics, exploring a fantasy realm. Both films utilise the animation medium to encapsulate childhood and invite a sense of nostalgia that differentiates from the realism of the adult world. *Ponyo's* 2D style feels more playful and emphasises childhood innocence and simplicity through bright colours. It mimics a storybook or the rough doodles of a young child and allows more room to play with fantastical elements, like Ponyo herself, as she transforms between human and fish. *My Life as a Courgette*, however, uses stop-motion animation with clay that may more resemble children's toys. This stylistic choice contributes to the film's more mature nature whilst still being playful with colours and styles that indicate an in-between feeling of childhood and adulthood. It also detaches the subject from the harsh realities of the story to create a dissociated space. We do not experience the full extent of the trauma because it is masked by the innocence of the animated world combined with the sense of humour and the young protagonist, who, like many children, is still too young to understand the weight of his situation.

For *My Life as a Courgette*, animation softens the adult features of the environment. The adult world and its amenities are still present but have been altered or disregarded as unimportant, depicting reality through a child's eyes. In this sense, rather than creating a new world, a child's fantasy becomes a reimagined adult world, as Batkin argues:

Fantasy worlds are those magical spaces children occupy within everyday play, through personalising objects for the purpose of creating make-believe worlds. Blankets and tables become dens, chairs are horses, cupboards are caves, and pet dogs are fire-breathing dragons. The child knows how to fantasise, it is part of the familiar terrain of early life. Adults look on wistfully, or quietly shut the door and leave them to it, aware that this is not their terrain (50).

Miyazaki additionally materialises this imagination in *Ponyo*, where he highlights mundanity amongst the chaos of the fantastical. Sōsuke is a human boy who lives in a normal house on hill. Upon Ponyo's arrival, the two explore the everyday objects of his house, where Ponyo

expresses her excitement and satisfaction over such little things. Here, the house becomes not only a standard home but a point of safety and love for Ponyo as she is invited into the world many of us wish to escape, but she dreams of living in forever. Child protagonists may exclude us from their worlds but also teach us to approach our own with new perspectives. These scenes in Sōsuke's home invite us to shift our perspective to a child's (Napier 236), something that resembles the fantastical animated elements of the film. Their capacity for fantasy invites entertainment and escapism, presenting us with magic rather than asking us to look for it in cinema.

To connect with characters, we must find them compelling and, in many aspects, realistic. Realism does not necessarily mean relatable, but we may become drawn more to characters who encounter experiences we understand. Although the characters in *Ponyo* and *My Life as a Courgette* encounter extreme situations in fantastical animated spaces, both films explore complex human emotions that encourage us to see ourselves within these characters.

Love and its variations are a defining emotion of the human experience. For adults, love can be complicated, messy, and painful. Yet children's encounters with love in fiction are all-encapsulating, purposeful, and appear effortless. Sōsuke's parents are married, but Kōichi is not mentioned until much later in the film, creating the assumption that Lisa is a single mother. It becomes clear when Kōichi, a fishing boat captain, calls to confess he will not be coming home one night as he has accepted another shift out to sea that this is partially the case. Whilst Sōsuke feels no animosity toward his father for leaving him and his mother alone, Lisa professes her frustration loudly, yelling over the phone, "Fine! Just leave your wife and son up on the cliff! I give up!" (26:47-26:51) and alarming Sōsuke. As Kōichi tries to send his wife an apology in morse code, she replies with a heated hasty "I-D-I-O-T" which Sōsuke quickly amends with wishes for a safe journey (28:13-29:17). Sōsuke then comforts his mother in a high-angle mid-shot that despite his small size, makes him appear bigger and older than the heartbroken Lisa.

This moment not only explores the complexity of adult relationships, contrasted with Sōsuke's childlike inability to understand such, but it also reaches out to single parents by commenting on the emotional toll of raising a child alone. Though Lisa makes some reckless decisions, her compassion for her son, Ponyo and the retirees at her workplace depicts her as a maternal figure to look up to. She immediately stops the car when Sōsuke claims that he sees Ponyo lost in the sea and takes the girl in without asking questions. She cooks the children food and ensures they are warm, clean and safe in the crisis. She is an avid listener to Sōsuke and keeps a watchful eye on him, saving him multiple times from the dangers of the sea. A long shot that captures her storming up the stairs, one child in each arm, frames her strong-willed determination to get these children to safety, not once stopping to question the probability of a wave suddenly rising so high nor worrying about any surrounding possessions. Lisa may encapsulate the single mother, but we find ourselves seeking aspects of many of our mothers in her and perhaps even pieces of ourselves.

Comparatively, Ponyo's parents, Fujimoto and Gran Mamare are also separated, with her mother being absent from her upbringing to focus on her deity role. Although big and beautiful, Ponyo also describes her as "scary" which Sōsuke notes reminds him of his mother (55:20-55:23). Her father appears to confront similar struggles as a single parent as he juggles his attempt to keep equilibrium between worlds while taking care of his many daughters. His parenting style is more protective, as he does not trust his children to care for themselves and

traps them in a bubble. As Ponyo tries to branch out from this restricting space, Fujimoto is less encouraging than determined to bring her back under his wing to “remain innocent and pure forever” (32:50-32:55), which Edwards believes prevents Ponyo from “changing, evolving, and growing” (43). These diverse parenting styles engage us with our childhood experiences and invite us to understand how parenting shapes who we are. Sōsuke’s independence and maturity for his age are due to his trusting and busy single mother, whilst Ponyo’s desire to see the world comes from her father’s refusal to let her.

Despite the complex relationships that the children grew up with, both depict an overwhelming love that guides the film and enamours us, even if we do not understand how to hold such a capacity for love. If a part of what makes the child an enticing main character is their innocent good nature that sparks hope, then how better to capture love than through the eyes of a child? Although there may be value in seeking the children we once were in these characters, the moral elevation we experience that invites us to “open [our] hearts to others and sparks a desire to do good” (de Leeuw 479) causes cinema to be a valuable tool in pushing agendas, messages, and circulating the human capacity for good.

Ponyo is a film that invites us to feel good about ourselves and the future of humanity the children represent. Sōsuke, as a human child, exhibits a love and fascination for the world around him. He is playful and adventurous but also responsible and kind-hearted. Upon discovering Ponyo, he instantly spurs into action to try and save her, dousing her in water and keeping her close. During lunch at school, he sneaks away to fill her bucket with water to the point of overflow – perhaps a metaphor for his overflowing love. In all of these moments of care, Sōsuke expects nothing in return, an admirable quality that conflicts with the selfishness of adult nature.

Ponyo’s reciprocated love is overflowing in an otherworldly sense, breaking physics and time laws that draw the moon to the earth and introduce fish from the Devonian age. These events are caused by magic and passion, unlike many other films that see destruction from war or technology (Napier 231). They combat the adult belief that humanity is destined to destroy itself. In addition to her enamourment with human life, Ponyo affirms her humanity in her and Sōsuke’s love for each other, capturing the simplicity of love and acceptance in a child’s mind. Each child sees the other’s differences as a strength, with Ponyo’s magic and Sōsuke’s nautical knowledge leading them to Lisa. Their love not only restores balance to nature but allows Ponyo to become her desired human self, whilst still retaining all of the aspects that made her different, portraying love as magic that restores and defies all.

Unlike *Ponyo*, where love is instant and overwhelming, *My Life as a Courgette* explores the search for love through grief. His experience depicts a child’s introduction to death (Batkin 34), effectively portraying a universal experience through the eyes of a child. Courgette’s grief experience is impactful to someone whether or not they can see their own grief story in his own. The film is valuable for those confronting loss and death for the first time or comparing a previous experience. It visually encapsulates what it is like to lose someone, especially someone you rely on. We imagine Courgette’s helplessness as he wonders, “Who will take care of me now?” (Baker & Sedney qtd. in Sedney 320).

Sedney understands the importance of others in supporting children’s encounters with new, overwhelming emotions (320). Even Sōsuke searches for guidance from Ponyo and the old ladies at the care home when helping Ponyo, and cries for his mother upon realising she

cannot help him find her. Courgette learns to understand grief by seeing how the others in the orphanage cope with it. Each child Simon introduces to Courgette depicts various encounters with grief and helplessness that normalise his experience and, inherently, ours. Simon's response to Courgette's confession that he killed his mother is not horror or shame, but a welcoming acceptance that "we're all the same. There's no one left to love us." (19:05-19:11).

Unlike *Ponyo* and *Sōsuke*, love is not natural and all-encompassing for the orphans but subtly evolves to challenge Simon's belief. Courgette's first experience with a crush on Camille evolves into a deep bond that prompts him to smuggle her into Raymond's car to protect her from her neglectful aunt. Raymond grows from the first adult who reaches out to him to his legal guardian, who often visits to take him to the theme park, his childhood home, and, eventually, his new home with Camille. Mr Paul and Rosy grow from foreign figures to surrogate parents whose love creates an example for the children and, eventually, a new baby. These relational shifts in Courgette's life are depicted through the colouring of the film, where the cool and neutral tones and drab winter world grow into bright colours and the blooming nature of late spring. Courgette exits the suffocating attic of his childhood home and the boxy rooms of the orphanage for excursions to the outside playground under the warming sun. This change in seasons additionally conveys the passing of time in which although Courgette may have overcome his grief faster than some of the other children, it still took time; we are allowed time.

Cinema is a valuable tool in finding ourselves and our experiences in the lives of others as it fosters a sense of normalcy and community echoed in a character's shared journey. Yet, there is more value in opening ourselves to the diverse capacities of the human experience. Cinema does not need to be a looking glass to the self but can be an escape to other worlds. It visually depicts the capabilities of human thought, emotion, and imagination.

Although we may search for ourselves in cinema, films with children like Hayao Miyazaki's *Ponyo* and Claude Barras and Céline Sciamma's *My Life as a Courgette* encourages us to explore the world through the eyes of a child, creating magic out of the mundane. For *Courgette*, singular places like the orphanage become microcosmic societies. Here, stop-motion animation visually conveys a world that is not quite reality but feels real. *Ponyo* and *Sōsuke* represent children who seek to escape into their own world, imagined with love, magic and innocence, visually represented in colourful hand-drawn animation. Their overwhelming love for each other, which contrasts with their parents' complex relationships, simultaneously invites us to project our encounters with love whilst indulging in the simple power of love and acceptance through the eyes of a five-year-old.

Courgette's journey to find love helps those seeking comfort in their grief narrative. Its raw and gradual exposure to all the encounters with loss and complex parent-child relationships invites a diverse audience and exposes those learning grief to the spectrum of stories that a universal human emotion can infiltrate.

Both films use children as beacons of hope who embody stereotypes of innocence and simplicity where every emotion feels new but natural. Although we cannot escape back to our childhood selves, cinema offers a nostalgic view of our past as an insightful way to comprehend our present and our future, simultaneously showing and teaching ourselves through others' lives.

Works Cited

Batkin, Jane. *Childhood in Animation: Navigating a Secret World*, 1st ed., Routledge, 2024.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003164296>

de Leeuw, Rebecca N.H., et al. "How Stories in the Media Can Be Meaningful in Children's Lives." *Media Psychology*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2024, pp. 479-502.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2023.2247322>.

Edwards, Kim. "Hidden Depths." *Screen Education*, vol. 74, June 2014, pp. 38-45.
<https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.436319471587877>

My Life as a Courgette [Ma vie de Courgette]. Directed by Claude Barras, Rita Productions, 2016. *Kanopy*, kanopy.com/en/canterbury/.

Napier, Susan. *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*, Yale University Press, 2018. JSTOR,
<https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv5cg9q3.18>.

Ponyo [崖の上のポニョ]. Directed by Hayao Miyazaki, Studio Ghibli, 2008. *Netflix*,
www.netflix.com.

Sedney, Mary Anne. "Children's Grief Narratives in Popular Films." *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying*, vol. 39, no. 4, December 1999, pp. 315-324.
<https://doi.org/10.2190/UN7P-9RXY-J9H5-BHN6>.

Sedney, Mary Anne. "Maintaining connections in children's grief narratives in popular film." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 72, no. 2, April 2002, pp. 279-288.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.72.2.279>.