

Not Belonging/Alienation

The Message in the Machine

(2012)

My husband finally got me to see the movie *Hugo*. I'd had no desire to see it when it was first out in the theaters, because it had been advertised as a 3D film. In my biased mind, 3D means all show, no substance. Plus I don't want to have to wear cheesy glasses over my actual glasses for two hours. Plus the things rushing at me in 3D productions make me feel a little nauseous. I know: I'm old.

My husband really wanted to see *Hugo*, but I kept deflecting him. We finally saw it last week, sans glasses, and I've been thinking about it ever since. The joke was on me, because I adored this movie, possibly more than my husband did. I now recommend it to everyone. *Hugo* is masterful. It is visually lovely, well-written, beautifully acted, and directed by a pro (Scorsese!). It is sweet, funny, heartbreaking, suspenseful, educational, and the bearer of a fantastic message.

The movie *Hugo* is based on a book called *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*. The author, Brian Selznick, wrote and illustrated such a beguiling hybrid of a novel and a storybook that he won the 2008 Caldecott Medal, which is normally given to a

traditional picture book. The plot centers on an orphan's tale. When Hugo's father dies, Hugo is taken in by a drunken uncle who makes his living by winding all the clocks in a busy train station in 1930s Paris. When the uncle disappears, Hugo continues to wind the clocks so that no one notices his uncle's absence. He lives alone in the walls of the station, steals food, hides on the margins, and breaks the viewer's heart. Hugo has inherited his father's love and talent for machines. With patience beyond his years, Hugo tinkers with and fixes all kinds of mechanisms. His true goal is to resurrect the strange, sad-faced automaton—a mysterious mechanical man—that he and his father had been working on together. Hugo meets Isabelle, a comparably lonely girl who loves to read, but who craves actual adventure. The rest of the movie depicts Hugo and Isabelle's adventure together, intertwined with the origin of Hugo's automaton and the history of the motion picture, but I will stop short of spoilers: I don't want to ruin it for anyone.

But see it! It's the message of *Hugo* that has stayed with me. Isabelle has also lost her parents, although she lives with her godparents. Hugo explains to her, in an attempt to assuage her sense of loss, that he has found comfort in the depths of his grief by imagining the entire world as a machine. Machines, Hugo says, only come with exactly the parts they need, and nothing more. "So I figured," he tells her, "if the entire world was one big machine, I couldn't be an extra part. I had to be here for some reason. And that means you have to be here for some reason, too."

It struck me as deeply spiritual, this young boy's attempt to make sense of a seemingly nonsensical existence. I like thinking of the world as God's machine, as a wondrous invention in which every part is needed. We are metaphysical cogs, souls with different abilities and attributes and functions, but somehow we all fit together. And we are all necessary for the grand machine to work exactly as it's supposed to work.

Isabelle's godfather is an older gentleman who exemplifies one of the pitfalls of aging, in that he no longer feels he is a useful part of society. Many older people, especially upon retirement, feel worthless, alienated, cast off by the lives they used to lead. My mother often spoke of feeling "like a leftover" after my dad died. It was like she'd lost sight of her proper place in the world, and instead saw a future in which she was an ill fit, an extra. Hugo tells Isabelle that it makes him sad when a machine is broken, because it can't perform its function. "Maybe it's the same with people," he says. "If you lose your purpose, it's like you're broken."

Hugo and Isabelle eventually offer an avenue of redemption for her godfather's brokenness, which is another reason to love this movie. Like Hugo, I don't believe we ever become spare parts. We are not created for despair. Our purpose may change, but we remain essential to the whole. Not one of us, in the divine scheme of things, is extra. We are needed. We belong.

If that's not a message from God, I don't know what is.