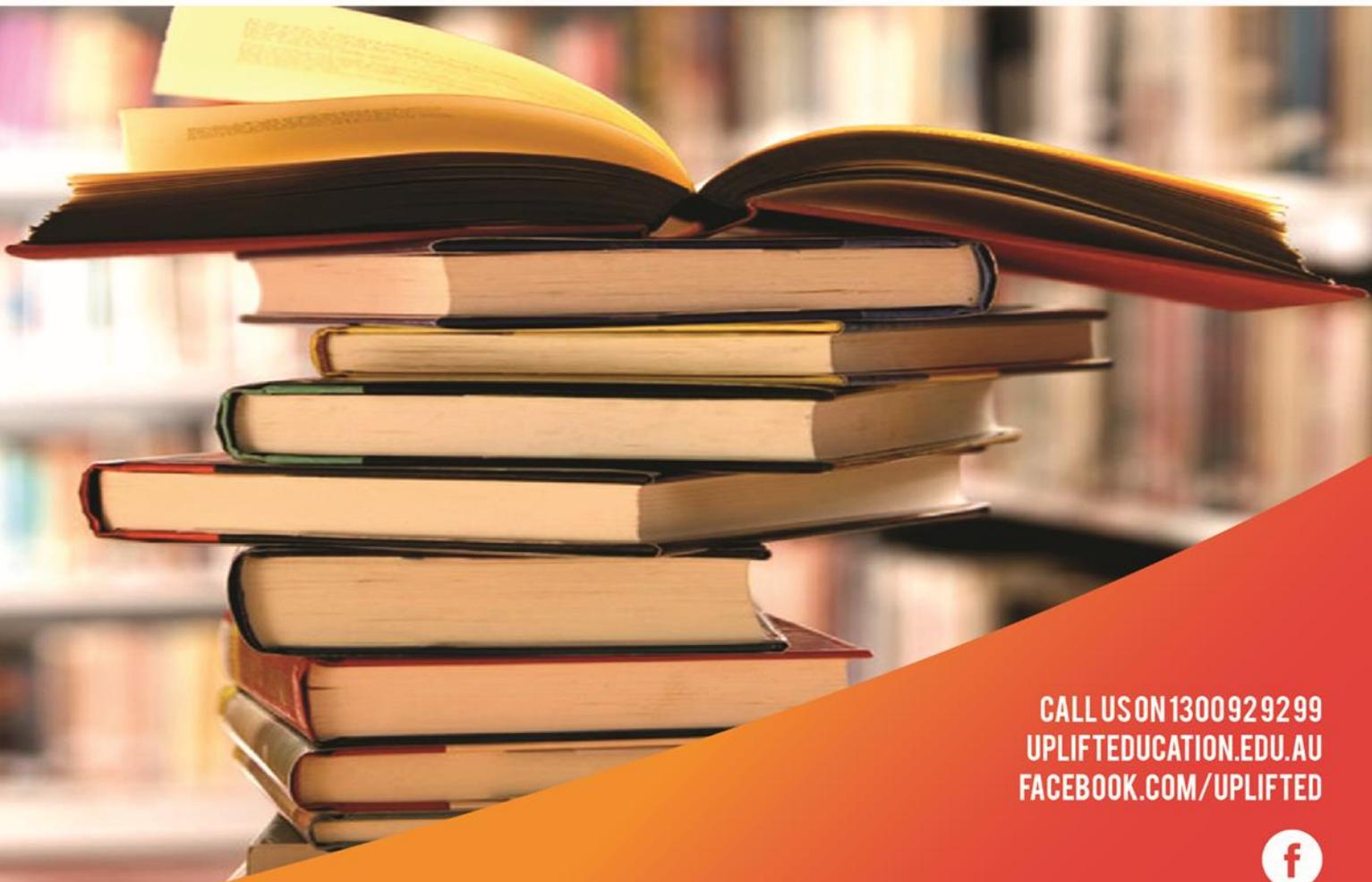




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JASPER MORELLO AND THE LOST AIRSHIP



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‘Jasper Morello and the Lost Airship’, directed by Anthony Lucas

The first episode in *The Mysterious Geographic Explorations of Jasper Morello* (2006)

‘Jasper Morello and the Lost Airship’ is a 2006 animation in the steampunk genre¹. It follows the story of a navigator, Jasper Morello, who goes on a voyage to place weather beacons, but when the ship is destroyed and their journey derailed they wind up on a mysterious island. This island is home to some creatures that feed on blood and tissue, but whose own blood cures an infectious plague affecting the city of Gothia.

The Medium

Steampunk borrows a lot of gothic themes and ideas, and some aesthetic and thematic similarities to *Frankenstein* should be noted: the plots of each revolve around the actions of a controversial scientist and his creature, raising some moral questions about ethics in the pursuit of knowledge, the hubris of man and the value of life.² These themes are matched by a dark, chiefly sepia, colour scheme and silhouettes of characters.

The narrative voice is also a little bit different to what we’re used to: it’s a first person, internally focalised narration by the protagonist Jasper Morello. However, by the end we discover he is writing an account of his journey for the benefit of anyone who stumbles upon him. In this way the story is self-referential, with the animation and story being inside the story rather than speaking to the audience.

1. The industrial age was a huge period of change and discovery, generally regarded as the technological and scientific prelude to the modern age. Do you think there is any significance, in your study of discovery, that this text about science and discovery occurs in such a time period?

Dr. Claude Belgon

Belgon’s character, though not the protagonist, is the chief driving force of the plot and also central to many of the themes. Belgon is characterised by two major traits: his pragmatism and his

¹ Steampunk is generally typified by an industrialised setting where technology relies heavily on the steam engine to power all manner of inventions, some more advanced than what was ever possible with the steam engine in the 19th century. Similarly, much of the clothing and aesthetic design mirrors the late Victorian era, and you can see the use of the ball gown dresses and crinolines for the costuming of the female characters.

² For example note the parallel relationship between the creature and the humans: both need the blood of the other to survive, but Dr. Claude Belgon’s actions evoke revulsion while we do not feel the same way towards the plan to breed the creatures for our own use.

commitment to science. However these are firmly connected. For Belgon, science and knowledge and discovery are the ultimate end. They are the only things he values and everything else is defined in relation to them. This commitment to science gives rise to pragmatism: everything else is a means to end, everything (and everyone) is expendable to the extent it serves science.

Evidence for this is plentiful. Belgon tells Morello at 6.22 **“as with the ant, every man has a purpose. He must serve that purpose, no matter the cost”** (emphasis added). Notice the declarative of “he must” and “every man *has* a purpose” – these are not vague statements, they are articulations of a philosophy he lives by and is certain of. The short scene of him and Morello bonding over the ant is a metonym for this philosophy. He admires the ant’s functionality, and Morello naively sees no significance in Belgon’s fascination, however it represents his perspective that the value and purpose of man is no different to the ant; that life is just an accident of biology and all that can be said of life is that it is about work and survival (for example, note how he parcels up women as the reproducers and men as the workers). Such a naturalistic, scientific world view is the philosophy that lets him act the way he does later in the film. **“No matter the cost”** foreshadows this, and so does the humorous scene towards the beginning where he shocks a man with some contraption. He is dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge, and not much else. But both the audience and characters realise this obsession far too late (though the pointiness of his features and the size of his forehead, the caricature of a mad scientific genius, should’ve hinted it).

At 10.50 he personifies science and says **“we have a duty to science to discover exactly what happened”**. At 13.30 Belgon convinces the captain to **“overcome compassion”**.³ At 14.52, as the captain is praising Morello’s navigation, Belgon impatiently utters **“yes, yes, a triumph. Captain will you give the audience to land?”** The insincerity of his congratulations is obvious and represented well by the pace of the dialogue and repetition of ‘yes, yes’. Finally, when Morello is attacked by the creature, there is an obvious turning point in our estimation of Belgon: he watches with interest, stroking his chin, as Morello is attacked; he exclaims **“No!”** as they kill the creature to save Morello; in the foreground he rushes over to the dead creature first, juxtaposed by the crew rushing over to Morello in the background; whines that a dead creature is **“useless to the academy”**⁴; and finally, there is the contrast of Morello calling the creature a **“monstrosity”** (and the Captain calls it a

³ At this point in the animation the extent of Belgon’s obsession isn’t obvious. Indeed the captain appears the most dislikeable character, especially considering how self-obsessed he seems a couple of minutes prior about losing his ship. This is an intentional plot of Lucas’ – Belgon is in the background of this scene, and just before we first saw the sedative he’ll later use far more evilly. Combined with the other early evidence, these are all subtle hint drops.

⁴ Again, notice the motif of ‘purpose’ and ‘usefulness’ and ‘functionality’. He doesn’t care about anything other than how things serve his scientific projects.

“monster”) with Belgon calling it a “specimen”. Later he affectionately refers to a maturing creature as “little one” and “my beauty”.

Two ironies attach to Belgon. At 20.50 Morello narrates how Belgon joins in on the party despite never before seeing him drink. But this narration is juxtaposed over a scene of Belgon pouring a drink for a crew member: dramatic irony is invoked as Morello believes Belgon to be drinking, but the audience only ever observes him getting others drunk. This has very sinister consequences. The second irony is that the chain he locks Morello up with, to ensure he navigates him home, is the reason Morello is unable to save him as he flies overboard.

1. What is permissible in the name of discovery? Can great evils be justified for the sake of great outcomes, such as the murder of a few crewmen for a cure?
2. Does the pursuit of knowledge and discoveries corrupt Belgon’s humanity? If so, consider this: would it be possible to rewrite this film from the perspective of the creature – minding its own business on its island, surviving on other creatures (just as humans do), then being kidnapped so it can be farmed for its blood to save another species. Does Belgon do anything different to the human characters that the humans don’t (plan to) do to the creature?
3. Discoveries are catalysts for change. How does the discovery of the kind in the text bring out different perspectives on life, values and motives of the characters?

Jasper Morello

Morello is the antithesis of Belgon. Despite initially bonding, “**we men of science must stick together**” and the “**many pleasant hours spent in hypothesis and postulation**”, they have vastly different outlooks. As opposed to Belgon, whose every aspect including clothing is steeped in science, Morello does not define himself in relation to his ‘function’. Belgon positively identifies him with his use – he *is* “**a navigator**”, just as a triangle *is* three-sided. But there’s more to Morello: he’d sabotage the voyage to go back to his sick partner, he promises her this will be his last voyage before he gives it up and they marry and raise a family, he is beset by doubt and questions himself after the other failed voyage. These are all devices for Lucas to indicate a character richer in breadth than the obsessive, one-dimensional Belgon.

Morello is also intended to represent the humanity Belgon has forsaken, but he is not a paragon of virtue. He is bested by Belgon’s manipulation and his concern for his wife means he keeps Belgon’s secret quiet, despite being suspicious and untrusting. It is made clear to us the crew would not allow the creature on board, and thus because of his concern for his wife Morello is complicit in the chain of events that enables Belgon to murder the crew. By the time his conscience pricks, it is too late.

However, despite this Morello atones for his error. He navigates the ship to unbalance Belgon and throw him over board. However this too is questionable as it only continues the motif of murder. Recall one of the above questions – are evil deeds permissible if their outcome is good? Does your answer change here – is killing Belgon morally permissible? There is also a parallelism here. At the beginning, the one degree difference kills a person by mistake whereas here it kills a person by design. Combine this with the recurring motif of the compass – does any of this have significance for us?

1. What is the role of the discoverer in a discovery? How does the same discovery evoke different responses and actions from Morello, Belgon and Captain Griswald? How much of a discovery depends upon the person who perceives it?
2. As above, discoveries are catalysts for change. What discovery does Morello make about Belgon and how does his cooperation with him change as he discovers more and more of Belgon's character, actions and intentions?
3. Can we reject or avoid discoveries? Morello doesn't react immediately to Belgon even though he knows something funky is up, and instead he tries to turn a blind eye. Do we have a choice in the discoveries we make? Do we find them or do they find us?