

Grave of the Fireflies

A young boy, barely a teenager, walks up to a farmer, towing his even younger sister behind him. He asks the farmer to sell him some food. The farmer tells the boy to go back to his relatives for help, but the boy refuses. The farmer tells the boy that it's the only way he can survive. "Everything's rationed now. You can't survive outside the system." At this, the boy simply decides to look somewhere else, dragging his sister along.

That sentiment is the heart of *Grave of the Fireflies*, according to director Isao Takahata. It's a tragedy of loneliness: the main image is that of a brother and sister, living a "failed" life because they are isolated from the society that is supposed to help them¹. This wasn't the message I first got when I watched the film, however, and it certainly wasn't the message most of the West got (who saw it as an anti-war film, plain and simple)². Along with its definite merits as an anti-war film, there is a deeper nuance to be found in the story, specifically in how it portrays sociocultural elements of Japan.

When showing the film to one of my friends in high school, I expected him to (like me) be saddened at the travails and suffering that both Seita and Setsuko go through whilst trying to survive. To my surprise, he emerged more angry at Seita than sad. I asked him why, and his reply (without my knowing it) would be the first time I was challenged to look at films from different cultural perspectives. He said that he was angry at Seita because he should have swallowed his pride and submitted to his harsh aunt despite her treatment of them. He said that if he were in Seita's place, he'd find a way to be useful because the aunt's reasoning was sound. In a time of war and scarce resources, you need to help your nation so they can help you. Seita didn't, and so he and his sister died when they really didn't have to.

It surprised me to discover then that, as previously mentioned, the film's director considered separating oneself from society to be the real tragedy, rather than war. Now,

¹ Takahata, Isao (1991). 映画を作りながら考えたこと [Things I Thought While Making Movies] (in Japanese). Tokuma Shoten. p. 471 (qtd. in Wikipedia "Grave of the Fireflies")

² Etherington, Daniel. "Grave of the Fireflies (Hotaru no haka)". Film4. Channel Four Television Corporation. (qtd. in Wikipedia "Grave of the Fireflies")

knowing more about Japanese society's focus on the collective over the individual, this reading makes perfect sense to me. Seita, though perhaps driven by love for his sister, places upon himself a burden that he cannot truly fulfill. He tries his best and is very resourceful, but in the end his efforts are for naught, and he loses his will to live by the end of the story. Perhaps Takahata wasn't portraying Seita as necessarily in the wrong, but as a tragic figure nonetheless because of the gravitas of the situation he brings upon himself. Watching the film again with this element of Japanese culture in mind, I indeed see how this traditional mindset weaves itself throughout the tragedy of the story. In Japan, especially in that time period, people tended to value the well-being of their communities before themselves, expecting that they themselves will also be looked after by the community. I feel like I understand the nuance of the film's tragedy in this way, considering that both Nosaka (the author of the short story the film is based on) and Takahata aimed for Sita's character to be based on teenagers from the 1980s, who tended to decide based on their own feelings rather than on traditional values of submission and sacrifice for the wider group³. This was meant to evoke a sense of empathy in the post-war generation, and also to react to what Takahata viewed as the danger of community being weakened by modern society⁴.

In fact, the film's entire aesthetic sets it apart from the image and pace of modern Japan in ways that go beyond its themes. The opening image itself sets a haunting tone for the setting: a group of young boys, all dead inside a grimy train station, while people in dirty clothes hurry around them without so much as a second glance. This was a stark contrast from the peaceful and prosperous Japan I knew of when I first saw the film. Though I was vaguely aware of their history, especially during this time period, the opening sequence was the first time I realized just what that all meant in human terms. This was a Japan on the brink of total collapse in the closing years of the Second World War. Families were separated, children died, and cities were reduced to rubble. Growth after such a tragedy was hardly a sure thing. It seems almost miraculous that the Japan of today ever even happened. Behind the suffering and the sorrow, however, I also caught glimpses of a much older Japan than I

³ "The Animerica Interview: Takahata and Nosaka: Two Grave Voices in Animation." *Animerica*. Volume 2, No. 11. Page 7. Translated by Animerica from: Takahata, Isao. *Eiga o Tsukurinagara, Kangaeta Koto* ("Things I Thought While Making Movies") Tokuma Shoten, 1991.

⁴ http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/t_grave.html

was aware of: before anime, the salarymen, and gleaming skyscrapers. Instead there were wooden houses, old kimonos that weren't just ceremonial, and a different sense of the pace and nature of life. Every detail, from the tin can of Sakuma drops, to the food that Seita picks up from his stash (like the jar of pickled plums), to how people gathered salt in glass bottles at the beach, spoke of a bygone era where the things I assumed were integral to Japan probably didn't even exist. Nowadays, having been to Japan often, the difference is quite incredible to me. I recall a video I once watched about foreigners who had moved to Japan in the 1970s, when nobody spoke English, where there was hardly anything for tourists to do, and where neighborhoods like Akihabara, Shibuya, and Shinjuku weren't yet what they are now. What must it have been like in the late 1940s then? It was (and still is) a reminder of how the society and culture of Japan is textured and nuanced, especially through history.

The film itself, beyond its content, hearkens back to a sense of Japanese cinematic storytelling even as it contains much influence from Western techniques. I believe this is primarily seen through its mode of visual storytelling. *Grave of the Fireflies* uses spare cinematic presentation, choosing to primarily use still shots: characters track across the screen, playing within the space provided. This seems to reach back to early Japanese films' "slim selection of cinematic means"⁵ as well as their more theatrical quality in presenting the events happening to us rather than focusing on the realism of their visceral experience⁶. There is no doubt that *Grave's* nature as an animated film influences these creative decisions (especially given its traditional hand-drawn nature), but I believe these observations about the film still stand because of how its visuals give us a sense of the world. We see the tapestry of the world in the detailed backgrounds, and in the still shots that seem to hold for longer than they necessarily need to (specifically the view of the burning city across the water, Seita playing on the playground bars while his sister cries in the school field, and Setsuko playing alone in the abandoned shelter while waiting for her brother to return). The presentational quality that the medium and tradition of animation provides ensures that, like early Japanese film language, the composition of these shots (along with their sequencing and music) display ranges of meaning beyond their mere placement in the story. Unlike the Western

⁵ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p. 5

⁶ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p.1, 7

focus of plot progression driving the choice and composition of shots, the shots of *Grave of the Fireflies* are devoted to moments of fleeting beauty (as in the shots of them enjoying the fireflies), contemplation and sadness (as in the shots of fishermen looking out at the burning city), and a sort of hopeful melancholy (as in the ending shot of them gazing out over modern Kobe)⁷. These shots all evoke themes and emotions of the wider tragedy of war and survival, rather than merely the tale of Seita and Setsuko.

All in all, I love this film. Not only because it's a gorgeously crafted film in its own right, but because of how it introduced me to a different take on the war story that's expanded my horizons on storytelling within the setting. I realized that this was a different sort of war story from those I was used to seeing at the time. Other war films I had seen at that point were certainly tragic, almost all of them focused on the soldiers of the war. Furthermore, the sense of present tragedy was balanced by the expectation of eventual victory and triumph (as all of these films were about the Allies). *Grave*, however, was the first war film I saw that was told from the lens of the losing side— from people that I was supposed to see as the “bad guys”, especially given Filipino history. This was a story of two children, however, who care more about their loved ones than about the wider war being waged (even Seita's more “nationalistic” lines all center around his father, who serves in the Imperial Navy). It was a story of survival rather than of conflict, where the only thing you could do in the face of the enemy was hide. It humanized the WWII-era Japanese for me, perhaps for the first time. I saw them as people with their own society, traditions, and little cultural nuances. Sure, their government committed terrible atrocities, but the people were still people, not complete demons. I deeply enjoy stories that add nuance to a theme or situation, so I was completely sold on this movie, which afforded a starkly human treatment of its characters and their experiences. There's no clear “right” or “wrong” (and indeed it's not about the conflict between “good” and “evil”) and there's no clear antagonist, against which the protagonist is expected to fight, and eventually defeat. There is only a war, and the effects it has on two children, who want nothing more than to care for one another.

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⁷ Japanese Cinema: An Introduction, p. 8