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Grave of the Fireflies: A Cry to Remember

Matthew Dillon

Is a movie that makes you feel unbearably sad still a good movie? Sometimes it takes being broken down to grow as a person, and I think there is no greater example of a movie to break your heart than *Grave of the Fireflies*. It is perhaps one of the saddest films of all time. A quick google search will show it on just about any list of “top sad movies,” right alongside *Marley & Me* and *Titanic*. Unlike those traditional films though, *Grave of the Fireflies* is a Studio Ghibli anime film, directed by Isao Takahata and based off Nosaka Akiyuki’s semi-autobiographical short story of the same name. It tells the story of two children, fourteen-year-old Seita and his four-year-old sister Setsuko, who become orphaned during WWII after the firebombing of Kobe in 1945. While I wouldn’t recommend this movie if you can’t handle tearjerkers, you would be doing yourself a disservice not to experience it otherwise. Its tragic story, realistic style, and ultimate legacy make it a must-see anime film, even if it is a painful one to watch.

If you have never found yourself moved to tears by a film, *Grave of the Fireflies* may well change that. As the author de Wit states, “it’s de rigueur for those who have seen it to admit they cried” (“Grave of the Fireflies”). It is even more impactful when compared to the other works of Studio Ghibli which Isao Takahata was a founding member of. Studio Ghibli is usually associated with the works of Hayao Miyazaki, another Ghibli founder, who directed colorful and fantastical titles such as *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*. What sets *Grave of the Fireflies* apart though is the weight its story carries and the realistic imagery and design in the film. Whereas most Miyazaki films deal with fantasy, Takahata’s film delves deep into the pain and suffering the two main characters experience during the war.

Right off the bat *Grave of the Fireflies* lets you know it won’t be a typical Ghibli film. After the intro scene we see bombers flying over Kobe, and Seita helping his mother bury their belongings in the ground for safekeeping. The colors and textures of the animation are far more realistic than any Mi-

yazaki film. The backgrounds are redder and browner, rather than blue and green. The beginning of the film quickly turns to shots of burned out destroyed landscapes after the firebombing; everything is earthy and smoking with red horizons in the background. De Wit notes how the motions of the characters are ‘realistically designed and animated with restraint’ (“Grave of the Fireflies”). This isn’t the kind of movie with a lot of intense action or powered up fight scenes. Seita and Setsuko are portrayed realistically, with all the frailties that you would expect of two traumatized and starving children. Watching their struggle feels like watching your own children slowly starve, being powerless to help them.

This isn’t to say the movie doesn’t have beautiful shots though. There are many shots with the background drawn in lush watercolor: of Seita and Setsuko playing on the beach, walking by rice fields and farmland in the countryside, and the pond outside the bomb shelter where the children eventually live. Their found home’s beauty acts as a visual representation of the hopes that the children have of their life improving; in reality, it is just a façade sugarcoating the bleakness of their situation. The camera often breaks away from the main characters to focus on “pillow shots” (Ebert, 5:00-35) of the children’s makeshift home, looking like a paradise but always with small details like a torn-up umbrella or dented water pail to remind you of the children’s plight.

The soundtrack of the movie is also devastatingly beautiful. There are only a few songs used throughout the movie, but each one drives home the emotions of the scenes they are in. For the most part the music is instrumental with subdued or intense violins and piano depending on the tone of the scene. The “Main Theme” effectively conveys a sense of ephemeral happiness, and “Mother’s Death” and its variations fill you with despair and hopelessness. The song “Home Sweet Home” near the end is the most devastating, however, played in scene on a scratchy phonograph recording of a classical opera singer supported by a lonely piano. If you manage to make it this far into the movie without crying, here is where you’ll probably break down. It acts as a eulogy piece for Setsuko, and I would dare anyone to try not to cry during its scene.

You can’t talk about *Grave of the Fireflies* and not bring up the politics of Isao Takahata himself. His movie is an adaptation of Nosaka Akiyuki’s semi-autobiographical short story of the same name. Takahata injects his own interpretations of growing up during WWII into Akiyuki’s work. A

major criticism about the film is that Takahata “resisted both the ‘anti-war’ tag given to his film and the melodramatic sentimentality so often associated with it” (Leader, “Grave of the Fireflies”), and intended for the movie to be a critique of the breakdown of Japanese society during the war. You can find many shots in the film that reinforce Takahata’s intent: Seita’s infatuation with his father and the Japanese imperial navy, an officer crying out “long live the emperor (*Grave*, 9:40-9:45)” during the first firebombing scene. Critics argue that the imagery in this selective retelling of Akiyuki’s tragic story fail to address the atrocities committed by imperial Japan during WWII.

However, the need for people to process the trauma of war is also necessary. Sometimes “we cannot demand ‘all the facts’ quite as we might like them” (Swale). Takahata does gloss over many facts about imperial Japan’s own atrocities committed in WWII, however that does not make this specific story of loss any less tragic. He failed to convey the message he intended (Leader, “Grave of the Fireflies”), and inadvertently made a powerful story that can act as a tool to help process the tragedies of war so often forced on innocent children. As a viewer, we sometimes have the power to reinterpret a work of art, giving it new meaning. I think that *Grave of the Fireflies*’ legacy deserves to be remembered as an anti-war masterpiece, despite its director’s intentions.

It is no exaggeration to call this movie one of the saddest films of all time. When Setsuko asks, “why do fireflies have to die so soon?” (*Grave*, 57:45-58:00) my heart breaks every time. While you might not have a good time watching it, that just goes to show the sheer power this film has at conveying its emotion. I wouldn’t watch it on a whim, rather you should plan a day to watch it, and if you find yourself feeling down that day, wait a bit. You should watch it with someone close to you as well because you both might need a shoulder to cry on at some point.

Don’t let this put you off from experiencing *Grave of the Fireflies* though, it is one of the most impactful movies you will ever watch in your life and very well may change your perception of war. Sometimes it takes the break from reality that animation gives to gain a new perspective on life and the consequences of our actions.

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