HSYScenebyScene

Scene by Scene: From Totoro to *Departures*

Movies are comparable to books in content and beauty. A motion picture can express grace, grief and savagery all in a two hour period. My passion for Japanese films has resolved to me that indeed, certain movies have changed my life.

My Japanese cinema affection started early. Captivated by the great animated films by acclaimed director Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli, I succumbed to watching *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*. The soundtrack “Carrying You” from *Laputa:* *Castle in the Sky* is still found in my “study” playlist and plays from time to time. *Great Detective Conan* was another one of my favorites; whenever my parents watched a particular television show or movie I did not prefer, I watched *Crossroad in the Ancient Capital* in solitude on a computer screen. Every time our family returned to Taiwan, my brother and I begged to buy another movie of the *Great Detective Conan series*; I’m proud to be an owner of five! Animated films can be gravely touching and caused my loss of innocence, and temporarily faith in humanity. *Pom Poko* is one I vaguely remember of, but the indelible memory left behind was the raccoon-dogs desperately struggling against the habitat destruction by humans. I am deeply saddened by the fact that real-life animals, unlike the raccoon-dogs, cannot fight back against humans to keep their land. Lastly, the film with perhaps the biggest impact on me would be *Graveyard of the Fireflies*. Seeing the horrors of war portrayed in such an innocent and delicate yet cruel way forever caused me to possess acrimony for any person who positively justifies war. A whole family was ravaged, as the naval officer father was killed in battle, the mother died of an American bombing raid, and both children died of starvation. The sight of a Sakuma Drop metal box breaks my heart and magnetizes the flow of tears out of my eyes; as in this box was where Seita, the brother, placed his sister’s ashes.

Obsession with samurai flicks followed. My father developed a love for Japanese culture as my grandfather was exposed to a Japanese education and etiquette. One quality that my father admires is extraordinary loyalty, as samurai have. Toshiro Mifune as the actor or Akira Kurosawa as the director were regular names that appeared on the screen during credits. The *Samurai Trilogy,* depicting the life of Musashi Miyamoto, and the anonymous samurai in *Yojimbo* created an ambience of the heroic side of the samurai life, as Mifune’s character seemed to be immortal. *13* Assassins scarred me for the brutality and sadism of Lord [Naritsugu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matsudaira_Naritsugu), including the tortuous murders and the maiming of villagers. *Ran,* directed by Kurosawa, left me dumbfounded as I tried to digest the dramatized remake of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. However, I felt the darkness in the blind loyalty of the character of a samurai when I watched *Samurai Rebellion*. Mifune rendered a father in a ruinous dilemma whose daughter-in-law was a former concubine, and the lord wanted the concubine back in the main castle, with or without his son’s consent. My favorite is *The Twilight Samurai*. It illustrates the story of a father who struggles to raise his two daughters amid his low social class and an expanding clan war. Before I watched *When the Last Sword is Drawn*, my father repeated his favorite quote said by Yoshimura Kanichiro to his disciples, something of this sort: “I want you to be like the cherry blossom tree. But don’t wait until spring, blossom now.”

*Departures* was another movie that compelled me to lament at the end. Daigo, the main character, took on a job as mortician and learned lessons of life while preparing the dead for the afterlife. In the process, he finally learned who his father is, a person he hated, as his father left him and his mother when he was young. Daigo performed the routine of beautification on his deceased father and found that he was clutching a rock that Daigo had given to him in a “rock exchange” during a father-son bonding moment early in his childhood. The last scene stirred me, and now I have altered to have an everlasting gratitude for the presence of my father.

Movies have ultimately shaped who I am. After watching all of these Japanese movies, each with its own lesson/mission in exposing aspects of life, I have come to observe changes in my perspective and most of all, my appreciation for life.