

Animation: Truth in Retrospect

As film connoisseur Jean-Luc Godard once said, “Cinema is truth 24 frames-per-second.” Film began with a desire to capture truth; the earliest movies in history were short clips of daily life recorded by the Lumière Brothers. Since then, improved technology has allotted filmmakers creative license to pursue various forms of truism—reality can be manipulated to reflect inner truths, and expression is no longer limited by the physical world. Animation embodies this freedom with its frame-by-frame deliberateness. Traditional cartoons capture childhood’s unblemished imagination, using anecdotes with moral messages about the “real world”. Adult animation takes a step further by creating the human experience under the guise of unreality, provoking the audiences on a psychological level. This transgressive use of animation is epitomized by the daring pieces *Waltz with Bashir* (Ari Folman, 2008) and *Grave of the Fireflies* (Isao Takahata, 1988), two animated films for adult audiences that recreate the war experience frighteningly close to the audience.

Both *Waltz with Bashir* and *Grave of the Fireflies* achieved reception on a global stage. Folman’s masterpiece brought in a lifetime total gross of \$11,125,849 (“*Waltz with Bashir*”). Takahata’s film had a distribution revenue of \$5,733,166 (“*Tombstone for Fireflies*”). Their success ultimately relied on the animation format, allowing for careful marketing and proper treatment of the subject that transcended the boundary between screen and reality. *Graves of the Fireflies* was adapted from a novel about World War II written twenty years prior by Akiyuki Nosaka. Nosaka had turned down many offers to create a film version of his novel. After initial surprise at being offered an animated version, he consented. In post-production, Nosaka concluded that it was impossible to portray the novel in any other form (“*Animerica*” 6-11). Folman expressed similar sentiments in *Waltz with Bashir*. Having participated in the conflict portrayed, Folman sought catharsis as he pieced together his recollection of the 1982 Lebanon war into an unconventional plot for his audience. Once he found animation, Folman insisted that the story could be told no other way (Freedland).

Due to their abysmal nature, some subjects are difficult to portray in live-action (war and death for instance, which are addressed in both movies). Animation reconciles this struggle by offering an alternative form of expression both sensitive to its content and marketable to its audience. The true power of animation lies in how it mirrors society—because it is so unrealistic aesthetically, creators are fearless and limitless in their choice of hyper-realistic details. Animation can confront subject matters too disturbing to the human psyche if encountered in any other cinematic form (i.e. live action), while still maintaining authenticity and provoking discussion.

To promote this discourse, both movies took great care appealing to their audiences. Promotional products such as trailers or posters cultivated a broad and approachable image. The trailer for *Grave of the Fireflies* opens with a vinyl record playing a light opera piece (Fig. 1-4). It then transitions to a bucket of water, its content rippling on the surface as the ominous drone of airplanes sounds overhead. After this introduction, the trailer reveals a quick burst of bombs and a shot of the flaming city. Although violence plays a great role in the movie itself, the trailer only introduces a glimpse.



Figure 1-4: stills from the beginning sequence of the trailer hints at war.

Midway through, the war scenes cut off and the rest devolves into a montage of happy memories. Without further context, this sequence portrays *Grave of the Fireflies* as a story of nostalgia and happiness—even hope (Fig. 5-8).



Figure 5-8: stills from the rest of the trailer, hints of violence disappear.



Promotional posters reinforced this idea by painting the children as survivors of hardship, but still determined and full of spirit. The story, as viewers know, is far more tragic. (Fig. 9-10).

Figure 9-10: promotional posters.

Waltz with Bashir took a different route altogether, opting instead to operate under the guise of an action movie. Its theatrical trailer starts with a dramatic sequence that engages viewers, stirring great action potential as it claims to be true. It poses as the adventure of one man's attempt to find his lost war memories, appearing with a traditional plotline and chronological events (Fig. 11-14).



Figure 11-14: beginning sequence to theatrical trailer.

What follows the introduction of the protagonist is a series of violent scenes that we assume results in his search for lost memories. This is a misdirection, as the movie is much deeper, nonlinear with a less defined plot (Fig. 15-18).



Figure 15-18: action sequence midway through trailer.

The posters for *Waltz with Bashir* also emphasizes a coherent journey of one man, highlighting enigmatic scenes of the protagonist as well as appealing to its action adventure genre. The material is set up conventionally to target a broad range of audiences (Fig. 19-20). Part of animation's appeal is that its format is commercially viable and easily distributed, given to viewers in a package palatable for consumption. Without the risk of provoking visceral responses that might occur in real-life scenarios, animation can be grotesquely accurate. Viewers are exposed to uncomfortable

subjects while being protected from their real-world consequences; *Waltz with Bashir* and *Grave of the Fireflies* utilize animation's potency in this regard.

In *Waltz with Bashir*, violence and death are recreated into macabre images desensitized through animation. We first see carnage in the overhead shots from a soldier's point of view in his tank. The faint light from above mixes with the dull color palette of the scene, illuminating the bloody bodies scattered below. The scene blurs as the tank moves forward, the slow churn of its metal parts droning ominously. Viewers are shocked with the level of detail on the bodies (Fig. 21). The next shot reveals a scene as balanced as before but reverse in position—the man's feet are placed from the bottom-up, aligning him closer to the viewer. This scene is more subdued, with a dazed soldier on the left, the clutter replaced by a few gnarled hands (Fig. 22).

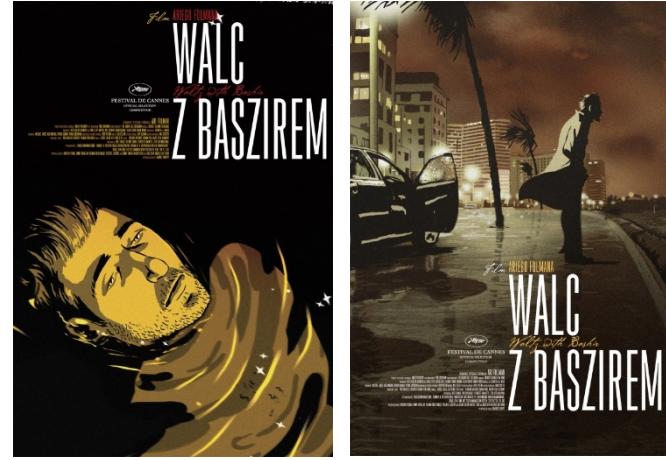


Figure 19-20: promotional movie posters.



Figure 21-22: stills showing the injured and dead soldiers.

These scenes give viewers a close look at the soldiers. The grotesque ideas are not so much exploited visually as they are implied—it creates revulsion, shock, and empathy from the audience without creating a full visceral reaction. Animation has created a precise moment made for maximum impact.

Another important shot begins with the sound of an electronic, non-diegetic beat. It crescendos as the camera responds in almost hap-hazard movements. It pans, tilts, and tracks actively until it gains momentum, mimicking the movement of a bullet (and its point of view) until it hurtles into a man's neck. The background beat is distorted when we move to the next shot at a 90-degree angle, one that shows the drops of blood spurting out to drench the man beside him (Fig. 23).



Figure 23: a soldier shot.

This sudden and violent attack is masterful for high shock value, its use of various movement speeds coordinated with the elements within the scene. Precise control over all aspects of this shot creates the overall mood, something powerfully rendered in animation. Indeed, mood serves as an indicator towards the attitudes of the subjects on screen. The film is interrupted by a music video of sorts, complete with cartoon-like violence and rhythmic movements. An unprovoked drive-by shooting is accompanied by twangy, non-diegetic rock music (Fig. 24).

The men collapse like rag dolls while the car drives smoothly on. This violent scene is downplayed to the point of triviality, as if hit-and-runs are part of daily life. Viewers are indignant; they feel victimized too.

Throughout the movie, there are no plainly labeled antagonists or obviously drawn sides. This struggle is clear when another soldier recalls his war memories. The scene opens with counterpoint sound, a calm piano melody that accompanies the lurking soldiers in the forest, crawling in the undergrowth. The colors of the canopy overhead are muted shades of green, with soft light streaming between the leaves. A lone boy carries an RPG (Fig. 25).



Figure 24: a drive-by shooting.



Figure 25-26: soldiers are gathered in the forest, shooting at unseen enemy (a boy).

After a quick cutaway to the present, we see his fate. The boy now lies in a bloody heap, his limbs folded like a broken bird (Fig. 26). The blurred leaves create a dreamlike quality, and the faint details of the boy preserves his anonymity. This shakes the viewer, further highlighting the senseless violence of war.



Figure 27-28: sepia-toned stills of the massacre.

Although much carnage and violence is portrayed, viewers still retain a sense of relief that the gore is not directly carried over from reality. This is made brutally clear when we are ripped away from the animated world and shoved into the real one, forced to face video footage of the massacre (Fig. 29-30). The original scenes were sepia-toned in the animation, emphasized by low key lighting (Fig. 27-28). The wailing women are



Figure 29-30: live footage of the massacre.

disconcertingly to the viewers. This is made apparent as the sound bridge passes over to the video footage, where a woman confronts the viewer head on. This alarming development shocks the viewer as much as it subdues. Likewise, the death of a small child is made more horrific when caught on camera. We are unprepared for the bodies sprawled across the screen, left only to gape at the silence that remains. The video footage was a frightening taste of what the movie could have been live-action.

In *Grave of the Fireflies*, death is portrayed in a simpler animation style. The consequences of the air raids are disturbingly clear when viewers are exposed to the body of the mother, a chaotic mess of bandages and bloodstains. The shot tilts down, as if seeing from the son's point of view. His mother's corpse lies on a stretcher, framed by black space in the background and gray cloth behind. Little maggots crawl on top, above the melted nose and blackened lips. Silence ensues. The next shot reveals a close-up of her charred arm, exposing the pink flesh beneath (Fig. 31-32).



Figure 31-32: shots of the dead mother's body.

She is a morbid sight meant to repulse viewers. Again, we are faced with the filtered aftermath of violence. Although a far cry from the hyper-realism of what can be encountered in reality, it is the most realistic portrayal under the circumstances; we are horrified seeing death up close but can still manage to look upon it in this form.

Death can also embody a metaphor, something that *Grave of the Fireflies* takes full advantage of. After the mother's death, the children are left to fend for themselves. With the help of her older brother, the young girl, Setsuko, captures many fireflies and releases them into their cave. The next morning, when she wakes up to find them all dead, she creates a grave for the fireflies and buries them.



Figure 33-34: shots of the firefly and human graves, edited to match in subject.

The bodies of the little creatures are blended into the background, save a small handful contrasting sharply with her pale hands (Fig. 33). As she narrates in a sweet, small voice, her brother has a flashback to how their mother was also thrown into a grave (Fig. 34). This parallel between the dead fireflies and humans is sad to watch—there is something almost pitiful (and

certainly pitying) about the way the bodies are tossed into the hole in the ground, too numerous to count or properly bury. Animation created simple shapes, stripping these scenes until only the heavy content remains, imprinted on the minds of the viewers.

As the story progresses, Setsuko's health deteriorates. Perhaps in one of the most heart-wrenching scenes of the film, viewers realize that she will succumb to malnutrition. She lies on the floor, her frail limbs outstretched in a gesture of peace (Fig. 35). Believing them to be rice balls, Setsuko places two rocks in front of her, urging her brother Seita to eat them. The position of her body and dull color palette gives her a distant look, further emphasizing her faraway state. She is placed in the middle of the frame, a soft contrast to the black spaces around her. Without the difficulties of control in live-action films (with a child actor), every small, weak movement is precisely made to touch the heart of all who have been with her throughout this journey. Animation brings Setsuko to life even as she lays dying.

Setsuko's journey ends with a release of catharsis that relies on the ethereal nature of fireflies, an effect only made possible through animation. After her brother has cremated her body, the dying embers of her fire calls to life a magnificent gathering of fireflies. The high blue sky is encroached by the shadow of trees and the darkened grass, with golden specks scattered across the middle. Viewers are connected with a sense of love, that the fireflies are kindred spirits of the dead. This delicate scene, the coordinated dance of the fireflies, would be nearly impossible in a live-action film and would certainly not garner the same effect (Fig. 36).



Figure 35: Setsuko hallucinating from lack of nutrition.



Figure 36: Setsuko's death brings a field of fireflies.

The film opens with the aunt digging through her belongings to find a tin can of fruit drops, background setting for the story to be told (Fig. 37-38).



Figure 37-38: live-action version starts with the aunt's POV.

One of the few portrayals of death in the movie is the mother, and her body is clearly censored for television/live-action viewing (Fig. 39-40). The skin on her face is unblemished, her clothing fresh. It is highly unrealistic given the damages she suffered.



Figure 39-40: The mother's death as portrayed in live-action.



Figure 41: a covered grave.

The grave of the fireflies is censored too, with no brutal flashback of the mother being tossed into the pit. The dead fireflies are not shown; the parallel not drawn (Fig. 41). This scene does not have as great an impact as the animated version does.



Figure 50: Setsuko's fireflies are animated even in the live-action version, showing the power of the technique.

Finally, the cathartic scene of Setsuko's death and the rise of the fireflies, *even in the live-action film*, was created using animation (Fig. 50). Only animation is capable of producing this magical atmosphere and reflecting inner truth, as nothing in reality can be orchestrated with such finesse.

Complete live-action would overwhelm the purpose of *Waltz with Bashir*. It denatured the story in *Grave of the Fireflies*. After contemplating these extremes, we can conclude that animation appeals the most to viewers. Its ideas being portrayed are symbolic, forcing us to consider the human subjects in the films. It creates wartime sympathy that is not overshadowed by suffering or death. Ultimately, animation recreates the human experience at a safe enough distance so we can approach it without bearing psychological repercussions. It is an instigator; there are fatal consequences at stake if we continue with our ignorance. The true power of animation lies in its ability to seek out and strip the truth bare, something that is not limited by the physical world or reality.

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