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Leann Wolley
Pepperdine University

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the cultural significance of orphans in the post-modern media, using as a case study two Japanese films: *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Nobody Knows*. Through comparing the films and examining their approach to the orphan storytelling this paper attempts to gain insight into post-modern Japanese attitudes about social issues. By analyzing the appeal of the films to Japanese and international audiences, it also attempts to explain their popularity by drawing parallels between the main characters of each motion picture and the average post-modern citizen.

World societies almost universally view orphans as deserving of aid and sympathy, with tales of their patience and suffering periodically bobbing to the art scene's surface in stories for the page, stage, or screen. However, these renditions often veer into predictably gloomy territory, with black-and-white conclusions of bright opportunity or grim fate. While many of these works grossly stereotype the experiences of orphans across the world, two Japanese films—*Grave of the Fireflies* [*Hotaru no Haka*] (1988) and *Nobody Knows* [*Daremo Shiranai*] (2004)—break out of this tired pattern, compellingly portraying siblings trapped in a parentless world. Through these children's struggles, which are set in concrete time and place, the films address the breakdown of family in contemporary Japanese society and allow audiences to emotionally identify with an unacknowledged, post-modern sense of abandonment.

Powerful in its deftly rendered backgrounds and expressive characters, Isao Takahata's *Grave of the Fireflies* brings World-War-II-era Japan to life with surprising vigor. Set in the port city of Kobe as it undergoes the last throes of war, the film follows two siblings as they flee firebomb raids and attempt to scratch out a meager existence (Mes, 2004). The bombing sequences in the film are illustrated with chilling clarity, which somehow makes them more impactful than the often shadowy and dust-choked visuals of live-action war films. This precision of setting and execution takes the story of Seita and Setsuko away from the familiar, maudlin territory of many orphan narratives, making it a moving portrait of two children facing the everyday hell of war. Although the threat of violent attack looms close throughout the film, stretches of muted action in the film documenting the siblings' quiet decline bring a universal sense to their suffering that transcends the immediate context of war and seems to speak to contemporary life.

Their suffering is not alleviated in the least when the war comes to an end. Instead, Seita

learns of the Japanese defeat at a local bank from a man in line behind him. The man's conversational calm in speaking about Japanese surrender and his matter-of-fact confirmation of the Imperial Navy's demise contrast so sharply with Seita's shock that his faithful trudge through the war becomes suddenly pitiful in the scene's context. There should be a sense of relief at this resolution of aggressions, but the toll the war has taken on his sister Setsuko and the rest of their family cannot be undone; and thus, there is only grief and desolation left to her older brother in this newfound time of peace.

Also set in a time of crisis, Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows* portrays a family of orphans in Tokyo's post-bubble economy recession of the early 1990's. Although the film's premise is derived from the "Affair of the Four Abandoned Children of Nishi-Sugamo," a news story that shocked the Japanese nation in the late 1980's, Kore-eda makes no attempt to precisely recreate the real-life crisis, instead using it more as an inspiration for the film (Bear, 2005). While this economic crisis may not appear as serious as that of the war-torn Japan in *Grave of the Fireflies*, the children's experience in this postmodern context mirrors that of the wartime siblings in its feeling of inexorable decline as innocence is ground to dust under the demands of survival. Much like the children's apartment, filled with dingy pictures and moldering rubbish, the irresponsible modern society they inhabit has itself become a poorly kept living space in which these brothers and sisters fall beneath the general public's avalanche of old papers and Styrofoam cups, never to be missed. The simultaneously familiar and anonymous urban scenery in Kore-eda's film reinforces both the ironic sense of the siblings' isolation and the dehumanizing monotony of modern-day city life.

More important than the settings themselves are their detailed execution, since both Takahata and Kore-eda built the premises of their stories on fact. The creative decision to not

only direct time-specific pieces, but to do so with exacting incident attention to detail, reflects the directors' admirable dedication to believability. While the factual basis of *Grave of the Fireflies* is easily accessible for audiences worldwide, Kore-eda's disclaimer of complete fictionalization at the start of *Nobody Knows* may seem strange to foreign audiences. However, to a Japanese audience with societal memory of the Sugamo incident, the reference is immediately clear. He preserves the basic concept of four children fending for themselves in a Tokyo apartment. However, he makes this disclaimer with good reason, as he alters several major elements of the original incident--moving the narrative into a timeframe that reflects Japan's post-bubble economy culture and changing the protagonists' ages by a few years (Campbell). In the real case, the mother's willful desertion of her maternal duty in favor of living with her boyfriend signaled in an extreme way the breakdown in family values and structure that many Japanese felt had accelerated in recent years. Thus, Kore-eda's thoughtful reimagining of the situation carries more weight than the average coming-of-age film.

Like many nations that have undergone the modernization process, and perhaps to an even greater degree than others, Japan continues to experience tension between the traditional and the modern in its society. Many have argued that this stretches all the way back to the Meiji Era, when heavy industrialization first took place in Japan and socially dislocated many rural, agricultural families whose livelihood had been connected to the land for generations (Beasley, 1972). In the wake of World War II, a similar sociological dislocation occurred as large numbers of widows, orphans, and unemployed citizens attempted to reconstruct their lives under the occupying Americans (Large, 1998).

Likewise, following the deflation of Japan's bubble economy in 1989, fast-growing centers of business and real-estate—the most typical example being Tokyo—just as swiftly

became centers of mass unemployment and business failure, leading to many family crises and a fair number of suicides (Koo, 2006). In addition, other stressors, such as modern working demands and greater female independence, have increased the number of non-traditional families in Japan (White). Peculiar to these Japanese postmodern families are the practices of *giji-shingurumazaa-kazoku* and *kateinai rikon* (Borovoy, 2005). Translated, the first means "pseudo-single-mother family" and refers to the not-uncommon arrangement of Japanese domestic life in which the father has almost zero involvement with the family due to his job—sometimes even living in another city to fulfill his company duty. The second phrase means "domestic divorce," citing another common situation in which two parents continue to inhabit the same living space for social and financial reasons, but lack basic communication and physical intimacy (White). These coping mechanisms point to a more Western attitude in the current generation towards marriage and family as based on love and personal satisfaction, but also show an Eastern sense of obligation towards the family's social and financial security above a parent's personal desires (Borovoy, 2005).

In the vein of other Japanese directors—such as Mizoguchi and Ozu—who have questioned the social price of supposed progress Takahata examines the toll of hard times and callous neighbors on orphans, the most vulnerable in Japanese society. Conceived as the more adult film in a Studio Ghibli double release with Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbor Totoro*, Takahata's screen adaptation of Akiyuki Nosaka's semi-autobiographical novel confronts wartime hardships with stark and unflinching images (Mes, 2004).

Instead of taking a blatantly pacifist stance, *Grave of the Fireflies* reveals grim realities through beautiful animation accompanied by sparse narration, the combination of which crescendos by the film's end to a gripping plea for mercy on behalf of the suffering everywhere.

Perhaps the most important narrative element in achieving this end, Setsuko's transformation from a laughing and playful cherub to a scrawny and listless child highlights, with devastating detail, the price of a society in chaos. Offsetting the heaviness of the siblings' situation, the backdrops of picturesque countryside and brief spurts of simple childhood fun—a day of play at the beach, the exciting camp-like preparation of their new earthen abode—break up the otherwise disheartening tale. While at times Setsuko's character of innocence and wide-eyed wonder seems over-idealized, this borderline stereotyping makes it no less heartbreaking when her brother must kneel alone beside her burning casket (Mes, 2004). Because the film begins with the story's end in the form of Seita's final moments, Takahata is then free to leave his audience with the harrowing revelation of Setsuko's death reverberating in their minds. The impact of this creative decision leaves the audience with raw, profound horror at the death of an innocent, and acts as a visceral reminder of not only the importance of caring for the weak, but also the importance of an international policy of peace.

Also concerning siblings in crisis and quietly reflective in tone, Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows* otherwise departs from Takahata's approach in *Grave of the Fireflies*. Kore-eda has stated several times that his desired focus in making the film was the family life among the four siblings and their resilience in a difficult situation, saying in one interview that he felt most affected by the original situation not when learning about the mother's negligence, but when reading quotes from the children that hinted at the close relationships they had (Leiren-Young, 2005). In keeping with his background as a director of documentaries, Kore-eda focuses on the everyday interactions of his child protagonists and maintains a muted narrative, with no domestic histrionics or gaudy displays of despair (Campbell, 2004). The even emotional tempo of the film, due largely to its calm observation of Akira's attempts to keep his little family together, builds a

silent but agonizing pathos.

True to his roots, Kore-eda's camerawork feels very natural, and his camera angles frequently reflect the point of view an audience member would have if standing alongside one of the actors. The visual motifs, formed by domestic images of the preparation and consumption of food, paying of bills, and other household routines, reinforce this sense of realism (Campbell, 2004). The passage of time also plays a notable stylistic role in *Nobody Knows*, and the imagery of each season lends additional emphasis to the length of the mother's absence—also shown by the accumulation of waste in the apartment and gradual deterioration of the siblings' personal appearance (Mes, 2004). More importantly, the recurring hand shots during the course of the film signal important points in the narrative and, by the director's own admission, serve to express the characters' feelings (Leiren-Young, 2005). Perhaps the most meaningful symbol in the film, the small ramen-noodle forest the four siblings cultivate on their once-forbidden balcony visually expresses the still-growing but ragged thing their home life has become. Significantly, the precarious existence of their small world is linked to a rickety chair and this small patch of green. When a low camera angle shows Yuki's small feet climbing to the red-upholstered chair seat and then cuts to a bird's-eye shot, a single potted shoot falls from its place on the balcony rail before its Styrofoam container splits open on the concrete below, rendering her death simultaneously dreamy and heartbreaking in its symbolism.

Central in *Grave of the Fireflies* as well as *Nobody Knows*, this death of an orphaned little girl carries significant meaning. Portrayed in both pieces as the most openly upset by abandonment and the last to understand it, the youngest girl of the family becomes the quintessential illustration of childhood innocence. Her gender and age are significant because they allow her to be overtly emotional over her loss of parents, despite the fact that this may

seem weak. In contrast, boys in the same position are expected to harden themselves and bear responsibility to some extent at any age, while older girls have often been socialized to cope less expressively, much the way Kyoko does in *Nobody Knows*. Therefore, when this key thread is ripped from the fabric of sibling relations so vital to the orphans' survival, it spells both the physical and spiritual death of innocence. The remaining siblings must then confront a deep sense of failure and loss as they face the future, their innocence irretrievably lost amidst the flow of time and the earth in their sister's grave.

Since the loss of innocence is the culmination of these stories, it makes artistic sense to end each work with this emotionally resonant point. In recognition of such an impactful revelation in plot, the directors rearrange the traditional narrative order in both cases to hint at the end in the opening scenes—one with Seita's death and the other with a scruffy Akira stroking an enigmatic suitcase—only to build back up to it by the end of the film, leaving the audience to ponder the ramifications of the fully revealed loss.

Grave of the Fireflies and *Nobody Knows* prove to be more than mere dramas in the tragic tradition, however. When examined in a wider cultural context, it becomes apparent that some films, these two included, serve to fill not just a demand for popular entertainment, but a societal need. With each piece's background in Japanese history, they specifically function as what some scholars have termed the "narratives of remembering" (Sugimoto 2003). In the post-modern context of a technological explosion the world's citizens have become far more visual in their modes of communication and documentation, with feature films, television, and digital photographs dominating everyday life. Much the same way as epic poetry or historical paintings have functioned in the past, films today serve to inform each nation's people of their own background while influencing the way historical events are remembered (Sugimoto, 2003). This

aspect of self-aware rehashing of real events in stylized form becomes very important when attempting to discover the psychosocial root of these orphan stories' appeal.

The universal themes of loved ones lost or the plight of the unprotected provides a surface explanation of the continued interest in these films, but their unique look at abandonment, loss of identity, and degradation in modern society holds an even deeper appeal. In the thoroughly industrialized countries of the world, where urban dwellers have become the majority of national populations, loneliness in the midst of great masses has become an easily identifiable sensation for many people of the world. In the absence of an organically formed community based around an extended family and direct ties to the land that foster geographic identification and thus local identity, many people feel forgotten, uncared-for, or completely dispensable. Given that most citizens of the developed world are uninvolved in farming, modern life is a highly mobile and unstable one, defined chiefly by arbitrary relationships that are determined by the apartment complex or subdivision a person chooses and their job environment. Reflecting this in the Sugamo case, only the oldest child was registered with the government—a fact implied in *Nobody Knows* (Leiren-Young, 2005). Without formal identification by the government, literally no one knew to look for the children. What does it mean for these children and the rest of their society if a human has no identity without arbitrary government labeling? In this sense, post-modern citizens are all orphans in a society of systemic dislocation.

Identifying with the orphans in *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Nobody Knows* allows the audience, for a few hours, to identify with their buried sense of grief over the loss of regional identity, meaningful relations with family, and fully integrated social lives. Post-modern humanity has built societal institutions and technologies that now seem far too large for any one citizen to control, leaving many with a sense of helplessness. Overwhelmed in the face of the

machine-like indifference of post-modern society, people become not so unlike terrified children themselves, bereft of mental security and moral guidance. In experiencing the horror of these children's fictional abandonment, contemporary audiences experience a cathartic purge of unacknowledged emotions, thus coming away with a sense of heavy-hearted satisfaction.

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