

## 17 Travelling *Grave of the Fireflies*

The gap between creators' intentions  
and audiences'/tourists' interpretations

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The animation film *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) 'tells the story of a brother and sister who lost their mother in an air raid in Kobe, and how they both lost their lives in the ensuing hardship' (Takahata 2015: 4). It was written and directed by Takahata Isao, based on Nosaka Akiyuki's novel of the same name. When it was decided that the original novel would be made into a film, Nosaka spoke with Takahata about his novel as follows: '[Although the novel is ... ] certainly based on my own experiences, I couldn't help glorifying the brother [Seita] [to] make up for what I, myself, could not do in reality' (Takahata and Nosaka 1991: 424, 426). 'I was not as kind to my sister as the boy in the novel is, and I wrote very badly about the adults around me, even though it was a novel' (Nosaka 1987: 270). In other words, Nosaka constructed his literary work by fictionalizing his own war experiences. He reconstructed them as a fictional narrative world in the form of a *shinjū-mono*, a drama in which lovers commit double suicide in the name of eternal love. Takahata noted that he felt like he was reading a *shinjū-mono* by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, a jōruri and kabuki playwright in the Edo period, when he first read the original novel (Takahata 1991: 422).

Takahata adapted Nosaka's original novel for the animation film with the same commitment to the faithful depiction of place and historical fact that he had when creating the 1974 TV anime *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* based on Johanna Spyri's original novel (Yamamura 2020). He carried out various surveys, including location hunting, and drew on his own war experiences. Both Nosaka and Takahata experienced the war, but while Nosaka created a literary world through the fictionalization of his own experiences, Takahata tried to add an element of reality to Nosaka's fictional narrative world through the faithful representation of details of places, things, and events. In this respect, the approaches of the two creators to their works are in sharp contrast to each other.

Takahata's vision can be perceived in his thorough investigation of 'everything from the structure of incendiary bombs to the flight paths of B-29s, from drop cans to phonographs' (Studio Ghibli 2013: 32). Takahata was nine years old when he 'ran for his life' from the incendiary bombs that rained down on him in Okayama, and he took great pains to depict these incendiary bombs realistically in *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata 1988: 74–76). Speaking about his commitment to faithfully depicting such details, Takahata argued: 'Today's dramas and films don't depict air raids properly, and I think they will become even more difficult to depict. That's what worries me. There are too many lies ... We shouldn't neglect the details' (Takahata and Kanzaki 2015: 24).

Takahata's pursuit of reality is evident in his location hunting as a contents tourist of the original novel. In March 1987, Takahata, Kondo Yoshifumi (character design, animation director), Yamamoto Nizo (art director), and Momose Yoshiyuki (layout, assistant art director) went on a location-hunting trip to places associated with Nosaka's original novel, such as Kobe city and Manchidani-cho in Nishinomiya city. At this time, Nosaka gave a guided tour to the crew based on his own war experience (Nosaka 1987: 271, Studio Ghibli 2013: 30, 42, 110).

Takahata created a realistic depiction in the film of actual buildings and landscapes, based on exhaustive location hunting. The crew took still photographs during the location hunting, and the 2012 Blu-ray edition of *Grave of the Fireflies* includes 105 of them in the special features section. Thanks to these location records and faithfully depicted scenes in the film, fans can identify the locations and travel back in time along Takahata's route. Travelogues describing *Grave of the Fireflies* contents tourism also can be found on the Internet (e.g. tati 2019; Castle n.d.). As a fan of the film and its director Takahata, I have walked the streets of Kobe and Nishinomiya with the help of these location photos, too.

Takahata insisted on faithful representation. However, he said that he did not intend to spread an anti-war message through the film. In other words, striving to improve the quality of a film is one thing, but putting messages in it is quite another. He spoke about this clearly: 'In fact, I did not make this film with the intention of conveying an anti-war message' (Takahata 1991: 441). Furthermore,

My own experiences [of war] are strongly reflected [in this film], but I don't think that makes it an anti-war statement ... I'm a clearly anti-war person. However, it is completely different being an anti-war person and advocating anti-war stances through one's work.

(Takahata and Kanzaki 2015: 24)

Nosaka, in a conversation with Takahata before the film was made, also clearly stated his desire regarding how the film should be made: ‘I don’t like anti-war films of any kind, and I don’t like films that make the audience just feel sorry for the poor characters’ (Takahata and Nosaka 1991: 426). In any case, in Takahata’s words, the film *Grave of the Fireflies* is also, as Nosaka intended in his original novel, ‘a kind of *shinjū-mono*, the first since Chikamatsu’s work’ from the Edo era, in which ‘the premise of death’ and the drama of ‘how it happened is expressed in a condensed form by a brother and sister alone’ (Takahata and Kanzaki 2015: 24).

However, after the film’s release, Takahata learned that ‘an overwhelming majority of people who saw the film read an “anti-war” message into the film’ and that ‘there was a simple but honest response across the country such as “we must never start a war again”’ (Takahata 1991: 443–444). Similar reactions by contents tourists of the film can be seen in their online feedback. For example, one fan, after visiting the locations, wrote in his blog: ‘I will continue to convey the horror and stupidity of war to the world ... I hope that this article will inspire you to visit the locations and learn more about the war, even if only a little’ (tati 2019). In response to such audience reactions, Takahata said he noticed that ‘it is a natural reaction’ for many people to ‘accept the film as an anti-war film’. He ‘regretted his previous thinking’ (Takahata 1991: 444) that ‘he had been uncomfortable with the film being placed in the anti-war genre’ insisting that ‘it is not an anti-war film’ (Takahata 2015: 4).

Here, the creator’s intention and the audience’s interpretation are two different things. In light of the above, it is suggested that even without the creator’s anti-war message his realistic portrayal of the locations, fire-bombs, and other elements of his narrative world resulted in a spontaneous anti-war interpretation by the audience.

In 2020, 33 years after the location hunting, a monument inscribed with ‘birthplace of the novel *Grave of the Fireflies*’ was erected in Nishinomiya Earthquake Memorial Park, Manchidani-cho, Nishinomiya city, to mark the area where Nosaka’s original novel *Grave of the Fireflies* was set (Figure 17.1). The planning committee, comprising local residents and fans of Nosaka, collected donations to pay for it. There is a slate next to the monument titled ‘Nosaka Akiyuki’s war experience’, with an explanation about the original novel and a picture of Seita and Setsuko from the anime movie poster. It is the latest contents tourist destination for the narrative world of *Grave of the Fireflies*, both the original novel and the animation film.

On the back of this monument are carved the following words: ‘In this place where Nosaka’s novel is set, seventy-five years after the end of the war we still pass on the horrors of war and pray for lasting peace for



Figure 17.1 The monument at the birthplace of the novel *Grave of the Fireflies*, Nishinomiya. Author's photo.

the children of today and the future' (author's translation). Furthermore, the fact that the monument was constructed in Nishinomiya Earthquake Memorial Park, a place of remembrance for those who died in the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (17 January 1995), is significant in that the local community has placed the monument in a place for mourning the dead.

Interestingly, neither the inscriptions at the site, nor the explanatory panels, nor the monument's commemorative journal edited by the committee (*Hotaru no Haka Kinenhi Kenpi Jikkō linkai* 2020) mention the fact that the original novel and animation film was a *shinjū-mono*. The contents are presented almost exclusively in an anti-war context. The gap (which is mediated by the contents) between the creators, who aim purely to produce a work of art or entertainment, and the interpretations by audiences and the contents tourists who consume it, likely can be seen in all contents. However, as far as war-related contents are concerned, these gaps raise various sensitive issues related to historical awareness and political ideas. Therefore, the intentions of these creators of war-related contents and the literary and interpretive structures of the audiences and contents tourists remain unclear. This is one of the main issues that we have aimed to address in this book.

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