

top 5 japanese films about death



Battle Royale

Japanese cinema is widely regarded the world over; the humanism of Kurosawa, the patience of Mizoguchi, the beauty of Miyazaki... it's all good. But there is a darker side even before you dig down to the illegal stuff. Here, then, is a shortlist of recommendations of films that tackle the only fear (except for a common dread of NHK's fee collectors) which we all share but can't escape: DEATH!

The first nominee is **Battle Royale**, an inspired movie about a near-future Japan addicted to a reality TV show that follows a group of teenage delinquents who are kidnapped, fitted with electric dog collars, given



Grave of the Fireflies

random weapons, and told they have 24 hours to kill everyone else before those collars explode. The film mixes grind-house appeal with an engaging story - especially when director Kinji Fukasaku takes the adaptation to heart, comparing the movie to his experience of working in a factory as a child during WW2. The legend goes that a bomb hit his factory and Fukasaku had to crawl over the bodies of his friends in order to survive. Fukasaku died before the sequel was made, so if you haven't seen *Battle Royale 2...* don't!

There are two awesome anime about the Big D. First up, **Grave of the Fireflies** (originally the main feature to



Barefoot Gen

accompany *My Neighbour Totoro*), a tragic story of two orphaned children trying to survive a war-torn Japan as the nation loses its battle against the allied forces. The second is **Barefoot Gen**, a grimly accurate depiction of the atomic bombings and how they directly and indirectly destroyed countless lives. Both movies are pretty long and offer little else besides death, destruction and disappointment. War's a bitch and few other films really show how innocent people suffer as comprehensively as these two masterpieces do. Not for the squeamish!

For a different view on death, see *Ikiru* by Akira Kurosawa. This classic movie follows an everyday salary

top 5 awesome deaths in japanese movies



Princess Mononoke

Want to see some truly awesome sayonaras? Japanese cinema has plenty of them, but here are five of the best...

The first comes from a legendary film maker, Hayao Miyazaki, with his 1997 classic **Princess Mononoke**. The film opens with a bang as an infested Boar God is killed at the hands of Ashitaka as he tries to protect his home village. He succeeds in killing the boar, but not before his arm is poisoned. Throughout the film, the arm pulsates with power and gives Ashitaka super-strength; this is shown to brilliant effect when Ashitaka comes across a farming community being looted by rogue samurai. He attacks with his bow, the first arrow from which chops off both hands of a guy whose sword is raised while the second takes a guy's head clean off! Decapitation in a Miyazaki movie? You'd better believe it - this one makes the list as *no-one* saw it coming!

Godzilla may seem to many as little more than a dude running around in a crappy rubber suit - a creation on



Gojira

the same level as Pepsiman - but let me assure you, when Ishiro Honda made the first movie back in 1955, Godzilla represented *so much more*. Being a personification (or "monsterfication" if you will) of the effects of nuclear warfare (and coming just months after the test bombing of Bikini Atol left several fishermen dead), **Gojira** was a touching movie. Most see the monster as yet another threat, and rightly so: it stomps through Tokyo, melting electricity pylons and munching on trains. Yet scientists Kyohei Yamane and Daisuke Serizawa are reluctant to kill the beast, and Yamane believes he can find a way to survive nuclear attacks by studying the monster while Serizawa knows that he can kill it, but only by introducing a new WMD to the world. In the climactic scene, Serizawa goes to the depths of the sea and sets off his new-fangled bomb (called the "oxygen destroyer") whilst cutting off his own air-supply. He kills Godzilla and takes the secrets of his weapon with him to the grave, making sure no-one will ever be able to use it after he's gone. This leaves Yamane on the deck, mourning his colleague and warning the world that



The Ring

more monsters might come from the sea unless the nuclear testing stops! A nice little set-up for a sequel, but who knew the franchise would still be limping on today?

It would be impossible to produce this list without including the next movie, so - to keep the masses appeased - here's yer number three: **Ringu**. This infamous film plays out as more of a detective story than a horror, but throughout there are glimpses of what might happen to our poor protagonists, and when Ryuji finally cops it we're shown how a crappy old VHS can kill. When the case is solved, Ryuji is just chilling at home and is taken aback somewhat when his TV flickers on and a creepy young lady experiencing the ultimate bad hair day comes stumbling towards him. Matters get markedly worse when she crawls through the TV screen and kills the poor bugger. Is this Japan's ultimate revenge for having Betamax destroyed by VHS, or is it merely a sign to warn you against buying that 42-inch flat-screen? Either way, it's bloody scary.



Ikiru

man (brilliantly played by Takashi Shimura) as he is diagnosed with cancer and tries to find some sort of meaning to life. He hangs around with a male novelist one night and a young woman the next, but still he finds nothing to relate to. His family seem distant and the only motivation he seems to have is trying to use his position at work to get a city park built. As you'd expect from Kurosawa, the film is touching and sucks you deep into a storyline that seems simple but is laced with the kind of everyday complications we all have to deal with.

A lighter depiction of death is the main theme to **The**



The Funeral

Funeral (Japanese title: *Ososhiki*), by Itami Juzo (who, rumor has it, was bumped off by the yakuza after making one too many exposés). This is the blackest of black comedies; it follows a family preparing for the funeral of 69-year-old dad/granddad Shokichi Amamiya. In the three days leading up to the funeral the family have to pick out a coffin and a priest, learn formal and confusing funeral etiquette and - toughest of all - survive each other's company. Rumors and hearsay float around the family unit as affairs and money disputes are nearly brought out into the open. It's far from a laugh-a-minute slapstick, but if subtle comedy is your thing, you'll love this.



Yojimbo

Number *ni* on the list was the only film Kurosawa made that got itself a sequel: the awesome **Yojimbo**, starring the ultimate samurai bad-ass Toshiro Mifune. This one follows a lone samurai as he stumbles across a town in need and works two gangs against each other to earn his living. From the start we know that "The Samurai" (the man with no name... if only they could make a Western movie with that concept) means business, as he takes on a group of thugs so easily it looks like he's happy-slapping helpless old ladies. One guy says, "I wasn't in prison for nothing"; another claims, "I'm wanted by the law, I'll be hung if I'm caught"; and the last one finishes it off with, "They'll cut my head off, I've broken every law." The Samurai chuckles and says, "So you won't mind if I kill you then?" Protecting their pride (instead of their necks), the bad-guys aren't discouraged and The Samurai deadpans "There's no cure for fools" before killing two with a single stroke and taking the last guy's arm clean off... all within five seconds! Short, sweet and severe.

Lastly, a film by one of my favorite directors: **Dead or**



Dead or Alive

Alive (no, not the crappy Holly Valance movie!) by Takashi Miike. This is a gritty cop drama with Detective Jojima attempting to track down crime boss Ryuichi. The ending gives us the showdown to end all showdowns. As Ryuichi drives along in his car with two cronies, they spot Jojima waiting for them. Ryuichi coolly states, "Here's the final scene" - and so starts seven minutes of the strangest cinema you're ever likely to see: After Ryuichi's car crashes, one of his cronies jumps through Jojima's windshield holding a grenade, which causes the car to explode and fly out of shot, only to land with a crash a few seconds later. The other remaining henchman then inspects the crash site, finds a bone and assumes that Jojima is dead... bad move! He's shot dead as the Detective crawls out of the wreck, *ripping off his own broken arm!* Ryuichi remains cool and the two then shoot the shit out of each other... As if that wasn't enough, the men, near death, each pull out one final trump card: Jojima has a missile launcher and Ryuichi produces a Dragonball Z-style fireball. Their weapons meet in an explosion that kills not only them, but the WHOLE OF JAPAN!!! Subtlety never was Miike's forte...

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