

THE RED TURTLE. Animated Film. Directed by Michael Dudok de Wit. Rated PG (Mild themes). 81 min.

This is a French-Belgian-Japanese animated film directed by Dutch-British Animator, Michael Dudok de Wit, and it has seven different production companies behind it. Three of the major ones include the famed Japanese Production Company, Studio Ghibli. It is truly a multinational film.

Except for the odd grunt or desperate cry, this fantasy film is wordless, and it won the "Un Certain Regard Special Prize" at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival. It tells the tale of a man marooned on a deserted island who battles a giant red turtle, that gives him reason for living. The movie is creatively visual and aural. A musical score expresses the mood of the film effectively throughout.

A nameless castaway, with no clear identity, struggles to survive after waves from a stormy sea, wash him onto a deserted island. The only clues to the man's past rest in his dreams. In one of his dreams, for instance, he imagines a string quartet playing classical music at low tide, which suggests he is a man with a cultured past. The man builds a wooden raft to try to escape from the island, but the raft is destroyed all the time by a huge, red turtle, swimming in the water, which breaks his raft into pieces, forcing him to return each time to the shore. The film keeps its action to a minimum, as it builds up its allegorical thrust.

The red turtle symbolises the help the man needs to learn to cope with, and pass through, the different stages of life. The island represents the world outside, where, those who inhabit it, are given the opportunity to experience companionship, and eventually find contentment and love.

When the man is unable to use his raft to get away and gives up, the turtle follows him to shore, and lies in the sand. The man attacks the turtle in frustration, and leaves it upside down to die on the beach. Guilt-ridden about what he has done, the man relents and tries to revive it. The turtle magically turns itself into another form that gives deep meaning to the man's future life.

The film is all about the struggle to find happiness, to hold onto hope, and to find the will to survive. With the help of the red turtle, which symbolises change to come, the man finds a female companion and together they raise a family. The movie as a whole is anchored to the trials, tribulations, challenges, and joys of human life. Beginning with the isolation and loneliness of a ship-wrecked person, one man is given the opportunity to develop into a better human being, and the red turtle is the means of helping him to become that person, and to find the strength to be a loving husband and father. While this happens, a cast of crabs frolic in the sand, and a bale of turtles stand guard to watch over what the man is trying to do, and to protect him.

The Director of the film (Michael Dudok de Wit) combines Studio Ghibli's style with Western computer techniques, and makes wonderful use of Japanese animation. Ghibli images are typically drawn very simply, and the film uses hand-painted scenes to create the feel of extraordinary sharpness of colour and form. Variations of a single hue (especially green and blue) often fill the entire screen. The same technique was used in the 2015 Ghibli film, "When Marnie was There", and this film, like that one, makes exquisite use of silhouettes, sharp-edged contours, and vivid images - sometimes drawn just in black, white, and grey. The use of "shadow animation" is a special feature of the film, where animated figures project long shadows to dramatise the effects.

This is a highly imaginative film, that is extraordinarily creative, and rich in metaphorical significance. The maturity of its themes might make the movie more suitable for older viewers than for younger ones, but its images are ravishing, its direction is masterful, and the tale the film tells is inspirational. This is a film not to be missed.

Reviewer: Peter W. Sheehan
Transmission Films
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