

Twilight of the Cockroaches ★★½

Year of Release: 1987

Review by Randy Parker

Country: Japan

Verdict: Skip It

If Disney were to make a movie about a community of lovable insects, it might look something like *Twilight of the Cockroaches*, the animated feature film from Japan. The movie combines live action with animation, a la *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, to tell an unusual story of man and roach.

If you are simply dying to know what the world looks like from two inches off the floor, this is the movie for you (along with *Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*). If the cockroaches in *Creepshow* or *The Temple of Doom* made you queasy, then *Twilight* will not be your cup of tea. The movie is set in an apartment inhabited by a lonely bachelor, Mr. Saito (Kaoru Kobayashi), and by several hundred fun-loving roaches (which are animated, thank goodness). Using extremely low camera angles, director Hiroaki Yoshida presents the world strictly from a cockroach point of view. Chairs, tables, and refrigerators loom overhead like colossal mountains. Human beings stomp around like giant dinosaurs. Ketchup bottles look like skyscrapers.

The roaches lead an idyllic existence in the apartment because Saito's depression has made him indifferent to their presence. In fact, he has allowed the bugs to take over the apartment; it is as much their home as his. They eat his food, watch his television, swim in his toilet, and play tennis on his tennis racket. The roaches live in such peaceful harmony with Saito that they have come to believe humans are their friends.

The central character in the film is Naomi, a pretty 19 year old roachette who lives on the floor of Saito's closet in a beat up sneaker. At the start of the film, Naomi is fairly innocent, having never experienced violence or cruelty. Everything changes, however, when she falls in love with Hans, a wounded roach soldier from a neighboring apartment. Hans and his fellow roaches live with a woman (Setsuko Karasumaru) who, unlike Saito, hates cockroaches. She is hell-bent on exterminating them by whatever means necessary, including bug traps, insecticide sprays, and rolled-up newspapers. When Naomi visits Hans, she witnesses human-cockroach warfare for the first time; for example, she almost gets trapped inside a roach motel, which is full of rotting corpses. True disaster strikes when the roach-killing woman starts to date Saito and immediately declares war on the cockroaches in his apartment. Naomi and her roach friends find themselves fighting for sur-

vival as their truce with Saito abruptly comes to an end.

With *Twilight of the Cockroaches*, Yoshida has achieved the impossible: he has given Man's least favorite insect charisma. Through the magic of animation, the roaches in the film have been sanitized and humanized—or, in a word, "Disneyized." They wear attractive clothing, walk upright on their two hind legs, and engage in human activities, such as dancing. Yoshida wants us to sympathize with the roaches and making them mini-humans was probably the only way he could overcome our natural aversion. We feel sorry for the roaches but only because the animation has made us forget that they are disgusting insects. If you start to associate the animated cockroaches with the real thing, you get an uneasy feeling in your stomach.

On a technical level, *Twilight of the Cockroaches* is beyond reproach. The juxtaposition of animation and live action is smooth and fluid. Yoshida has found imaginative ways for the roaches to interact with the contents of Saito's apartment. An empty cigarette carton, for example, becomes a bed. With a \$3 million budget, the movie is no *Roger Rabbit*, but the animation (while not spectacular) easily surpasses what you might find on a Saturday morning cartoon program.

On an emotional level, *Twilight* is both intentionally and unintentionally disturbing. The film, despite its Disneyesque look and absurd premise, is anything but light-hearted. *Twilight* is part drama, part adventure, part thriller, and part black comedy. According to the press notes, Yoshida intended the film as an allegorical tale reflecting the fear that Japan's selfish trade practices may cause other countries to treat the Japanese like cockroaches.

The problem is that the film sometimes strains our patience with its somber tone. Somehow, animated cockroaches and serious spiritual themes seem incongruous. The movie tries to be profound, but much of the time it ends up feeling pretentious, particularly in the scenes where Naomi and her grandfather pray to a porcelain bunny rabbit in Saito's back yard, a concept which is not nearly as funny as it sounds. Another problem is that no matter how hard you try, you can never completely identify with the cockroaches, especially when they make pompous speeches like, "We

have never killed a single human. So why does man try to annihilate us? He fears what he can't understand. God chose us to inherit the earth." It makes you want to stomp on them.

You will likely appreciate the creativity and originality of this animated curiosity, but you may leave the theater scratching your head and reaching for the bug spray.

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