

THE WEIGHT OF REMEMBRANCE: RE-DISCOVERING FORGOTTEN NARRATIVES OF THE KOREAN WAR

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71: Into the Fire (Pohwasogeu), directed by John H. Lee (Seoul, Korea: Taewon Entertainment, 2010), DVD.

War movies are a tricky business. Directors and actors alike navigate an uncertain minefield, aware that the fallout of a mistake is most disastrous in a movie whose opening credits are preceded by the statement “Based on a true story.” Preserving the nature of war in film and the honoring of both personal conflicts and national ones is a big-screen experiment in walking the knife edge between pathos and cliché, historical accuracy and pedantry, artistic license and outright falsification.

71: Into the Fire (hereafter, *71*) faced all these issues and then some. The movie is based on a story that is intriguing not only for being true but also for having gone untold for sixty years. In the summer of 1950, the first year of the Korean War, the North Korean People’s Army had advanced as far as the northern bank of the Nakdong River, which marked the boundary of the Pusan Perimeter desperately held by UN and South Korean forces. While most North and South Korean forces swarmed to the Battle of Nakdong River, on August 11 one North Korean division attacked the makeshift army base at Pohang Girls’ Middle School, about two hours away from the battlefield.

The only troops that remained to defend the base were 71 student volunteer soldiers, who held back the North Korean forces for eleven hours until reinforcements arrived and were able to launch a counterattack. Almost all were killed. Their story was forgotten until the discovery of a letter that one of the 71 had written to his mother. The shock factor of the story, its absence from the history books and the movie’s star-studded cast all contributed to the high anticipation surrounding the film.

A movie of this nature does not require too much deliberation on its cinematographic merits. It is, quite simply, a good war movie. An experimental, avant-garde film that revolutionizes the movie industry it is not – but that is not its intention. *71* is dedicated to honoring the memory of these boy soldiers

and making their stories heard, and the movie does this well, being full of gripping moments and some deeply sympathetic characters. The movie swiftly and convincingly follows the friendships that emerge within the days and even the hours that rush towards certain death. Kwon Sang-woo (Ku Kap-jo) and Choi Seung-hyeon (Oh Jang-beom) are engaging as equally troubled teens who have nothing in common except their confrontations with violence. However, possibly the most heart-wrenching characters are two brothers who go unnamed, the mortally wounded younger brother imploring the older to shoot him. In Cha Seung-won, the film industry may have found its first actor capable of portraying a North Korean character (Commander Park Moo-rang) that is not pitiable, contemptible or merely a face in a totalitarian machine, but – frighteningly – *cool*.

Through brief but vivid scenes the movie extracts some of the visceral emotions of war – longing for a meal from home cooked by a mother’s hand, disbelief at the sight of a fallen friend’s empty eyes and numbness at the sight of empty mass graves – while seldom detouring into maudlin territory. Another pitfall it successfully avoids is the temptation to force in a love story where it does not belong. While an attractive army nurse tenderly sews up the picturesque gash on Jang-beom’s arm and whispers in his ear to check his artillery-damaged hearing early in the movie, she does not reappear and it is Jang-beom’s frequent flashbacks of his mother’s face that give his character credence as a young boy, and desperation when that young boy is thrust into battle.

Finally, *71* takes on one of the most important duties of any war movie and tries to portray atrocity and humanity from both sides of the conflict. The film skimps a bit on humanity from the North Korean forces but acknowledges (albeit briefly) the tragic events of August 3, 1950, when the South Korean army destroyed the bridge over the Nakdong River at Waegwan and left hundreds of refugees stranded on the opposite side to be killed by North Koreans, if not by the explosion itself. It also turns aside questions about the ethical justifications of recruiting teenagers (almost children) as soldiers by imagining a North Korean soldier who actually is a child of no more than ten – and a scenario in which the South Korean boys shoot him down for being a ‘commie.’ The movie also avoids mention of other Southern atrocities such as the “preemptive apprehension” and execution of citizens suspected of having communist sympathies and US and UN-perpetrated atrocities such as the shooting of numerous refugees (most notably at No Gun Ri) for fear of North Korean soldiers being among them in disguise. These were, however, outside the scope of events captured by the film.

71 does indulge in some excessive hammering of certain points, such as in the form of a South Korean general whose lines are exclusively variations on the statement “The lesser cause must be sacrificed for the greater cause.” The film is also ambivalent in its attitude towards the US forces, which are portrayed as saviors who would have been able to stop the massacre of the boy soldiers had they not been too far off and too late.

As in all artistic renditions of great conflicts, there are also unrealistic and overly-dramatized aspects. The North Korean soldiers inexplicably (or in a fit of extreme arrogance) wear hats into battle against the helmeted South Koreans. They also wear grass and branches in their gear as camouflage, but carry enormous red banners in a ratio of at least one banner to every ten soldiers in their ‘surprise attack’ on Pohang. More than half of every battle seems to take place in slow motion, and hours before the dreaded approach of Commander Park Moo-rang and his troops, the boys are not planning the defensive, but instead indulging in a completely gratuitous schoolyard brawl that showcases a classic Kwon Sang-woo fistfight in the style of his popular older movies, such as *Volcano High* and *Once Upon a Time in High School*.

Looking past the special effects, the star cast and the hype, *71: Into the Fire* has serious issues at its heart. My immediate reaction as I watched the movie was shock and some unease that South Korean forces had employed such young soldiers at all. These high school-aged boys, and what looked like some middle school-aged boys, were described as ‘volunteer’ soldiers, but was that in fact what they were? Or were they conscripted? Whether their roles and their sacrifices were voluntary or not, after they died they would have remained nameless and forgotten by history had it not been for the accidental resurfacing of an old letter.

This train of thought led to my second reaction. The movie ends with fragments of interviews with survivors from among the original 71, which begs the question – if there are survivors with memories of this battle, why is it that no one even knew until now that it happened? Why did no one come forward with an account of a battle fought by such uncommon heroes, one that in the context of the Korean War is reminiscent of the Battle of Thermopylae? The stark conclusion is simply this: no one who survived this story thought it needed to be told, because to them – and to their entire generation – such events were not in fact uncommon. Everyone was either a casualty or a survivor of circumstances that only now, downstream of history, seem remarkable.

Upon further deliberation, this should not have come as a surprising realization. My grandfather was a boy soldier, too young to enlist when North

Korea invaded the south in June of 1950. He and his high school friends formed their own roaming guerrilla band, excited to fight the ‘commies,’ until my grandfather was wounded and all his friends were killed. It is my great regret that I never thought to be curious about those days while he lived, and that he never spoke of them to me. That is the way the legacy of the Korean War lives on in my grandfather’s generation. Everyone lived through it and suffered because of it, and few who look around and recognize their fellow citizens’ experiences think of their own memories of that time as more special or more worth recording for posterity. In this stoic and quiet fashion, the only people who have ownership of that history keep their accounts set aside – not exactly in secret, but not being volunteered unless some enterprising filmmaker goes excavating. And we are running out of time in which unearthing such treasure troves of unspoken, unwritten, hard-to-believe history is even possible, because that generation is fading away.

71: Into the Fire is rife with dramatization, imagination and artistic license, and it is hard to tell where history was accurately preserved and where history was embellished to awaken interest in it. However, that might be the right way for history to be channeled from now on. When even the people who lived through it allow the past, for whatever reason, to vanish instead of being remembered, the past might need some Hollywood help to be immortalized. *71* ended with characteristic big-screen hallmarks – dramatic last stands, bodies convulsing as they are riddled with bullets. But the impression the viewer is left with is the quiet weight of history, when the boys who survived the battle, who are now old men, finally allow themselves to speak of that time and simply say, “It hurts more not to have died there with them.” The weight of remembrance and incredulity that such an account was allowed to lie dormant until now creates intense excitement about other stories still buried in the nation’s memories, waiting to be discovered.

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