

Barnard College, Columbia University

Moving Out from Under Hiroshima's Cloud

Understanding Nuclear Genocide through Film

By

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To my dad, for teaching me grit; to my mother, for teaching me grace

Special thanks also go to my advisor, Dorothy Ko, who granted me the pen, paper, and most of all courage to write down my “own vision.”

And to my friends for their moral and ~technical~ support: this thesis would not have been realized and made concrete - flesh and all - without you.

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Introduction

“(Genocide studies) ...this has to do with the experience of looking into the abyss, and finding the abyss looks back.”¹

Only the Japanese have ever experienced nuclear genocide. The effects of the uranium bomb, so called ‘Little Boy,’ which detonated over Hiroshima at 8:15am, August 6th 1945, was so powerful it permanently burnt the shadows of people and objects into the ground. Around 140,000 Japanese were immediately killed by the atomic bomb; thousands more died in the aftermath due to radiation exposure. Symbolically, the bomb signified a few things; it quickened the foreshadowed defeat of Japan against Allied forces during the Second World War, as the former’s endeavours to develop a Japanese imperium was losing on every stronghold across Asia by the end of those summer months. It also revealed the scientific and technological superiority of the United States in comparison with Japan, bringing the Japanese to their knees by the sheer magnanimity of America’s power in nuclear warfare. One report of the damage, compiled in 1955, revealed in statistical terms the totality of the bomb:

The atomic bomb instantly produced a temperature upwards of one half-million degrees. One ten-thousandth of a second later, a fireball with a radius of seventeen meters burned at a temperature of three hundred thousand degrees. At the same time this extraordinary fireball created in the atmosphere an intense shock wave resulting in an unprecedented destructive power. The heat from the ball itself wantonly initiated both human beings and buildings...in addition the Hiroshima atomic bomb produced tertiary, and its most terrible, destruction through radiation.³

Thus, Hiroshima The Bomb promised a new era of total destruction; it heralded a new dawn where Hiroshima was “the first target in a nuclear war which has yet to be decisively

¹ Jones, Adam. *Genocide : A Comprehensive Introduction*. New York: Routledge, 2006, 15

³ Ibid.

resolved, and our present survival depends upon that irresolution.”⁴ Even with the end of the arms race in conjunction with the Cold War, as Margaret Thatcher put it, “nuclear weapons can’t be un-invented.”⁵ John Whittier Treat, author of the book *Writing From Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* examined Hiroshima in comparison to the Holocaust. While maintaining the differences between Hiroshima and Auschwitz, Treat contends that after World War Two, both places became inevitably related to the human condition, which he characterizes as “compromised by our ability, in a matter of respective hours and seconds, to eliminate whole ghettos and cities of people.”⁶ From a genocide studies point of view, they are also comparable because of the degree that science and technology were used to stimulate the mass killings, ‘punctuated human history with a period.’⁷ Both atrocities opened up an abyss in human understanding about civilization, to the degree that the world was forever divided into a before and after August 6th, 1945. A survivor of Hiroshima would later remark that 1945 should be declared as “Year One” of the “Atomic Age.”⁸

I seek to explore Hiroshima The Bomb, and the way we regard such acts of atrocities – specifically Genocide, Nuclear - through film, because I aim to understand how one can capture truths or restitutions that are sometimes evaded by legal and institutional frameworks. I specifically seek to situate the Japanese’ understanding of Hiroshima through my chosen films, placing the attitudes they reflect towards the bomb in the context of the social and geopolitical environment they were produced in. All films analysed in this thesis were picked because they

⁴ John Whittier Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.

⁵ Brigadier General Thomas F. Farrell, quoted by Major General Leslie R. Groves in his secret memorandum to Secretary of War Henry Stimson, July 18, 1945, quoted to Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance*, 310.

⁶ Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb*, 15.

⁷ Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb*, 17

⁸ “Ibid.”

each convey one incipient narrative of the survivor experience of Hiroshima – my hope is that in analysing them all at once, we are able to deconstruct the bomb by appreciating the complex, if not contradictory, attitudes towards it.

What role do the arts and literature play in the advancement of scholarly or general understanding of mass atrocity? In this specific case, how do they embrace nuclear trauma, nuclear holocaust? In the context of genocide studies, ritualized expression in film can capture experiences that are irrevocable; indeed, it was common amongst hibakusha⁹ to struggle in talking about their experiences. Claims about the incommunicability of the experience has often been referred to - survivors often described their feelings with the word *munashisa* (an empty and blank feeling) – as a way to express their language’s “inability to reconstruct the past as they believe they really experienced it.”¹⁰ Ultimately I wrote this thesis predicated on my belief that genocide is an abyss; to look into it sees the breakdown of rationale, which is where lawful institutions and frameworks leave us. Art with all its subjectivity, brings truths and restitutions that are perhaps not captured in a courtroom or a peace movement, to the surface.

It should be noted that the cinema of Hiroshima and by extension, her ‘neglected’ sister, Nagasaki, actually comprise very little direct artistic input from the hibakusha themselves. Of the films I have analysed, ‘Barefoot Gen’ stands out as it was based off a manga series created by Keiji Nakazawa, one A-bomb survivor. One large reason for this is due to dearth of written and oral testimonies of survivors; Lisa Yoneyama, whose seminal book *‘Hiroshima Traces: Time,*

⁹ The direct translation of this means ‘bomb-affected persons.’ Yoneyama examines the different meanings of hibakusha in *Hiroshima Traces*: “When written with Chinese ideographs, two characters with different meanings can be used to represent the syllable baku, making it possible to indicate the distinct historical circumstances under which hibakusha were produced: by subjection to the bomb and by exposure to radiation. But when written with katakana phonemes, the term can interpolate individuals doubly, according to the two meanings contained in the sound. “Hibakusha” in katakana highlights the commonality of nuclear catastrophes across space and time It occupies a transnational location that cannot be contained within the singularity of “Japan, the only atom-bombed country.” (111)

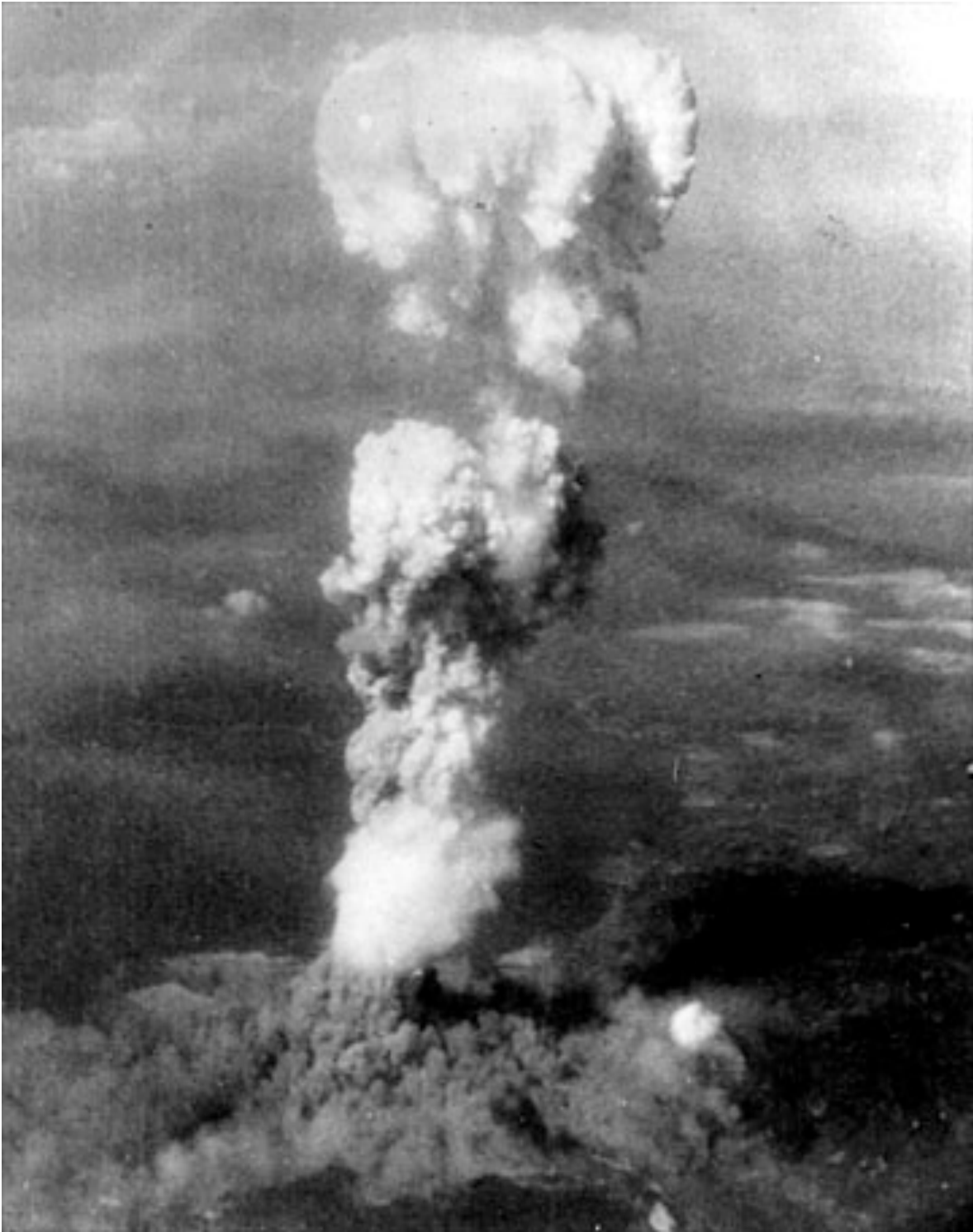
¹⁰ Yoneyama, 90

Space, and the Dialectics of Memory' was a key text in helping me understand the state of memory in Hiroshima, justifies this lack of literature:

"survivors must confront the fact that their witnessing of Hiroshima's obliteration can never be reconstructed or conveyed in its original form. Indeed, that the storytellers have survived that moment of destruction to speak about it in the present tense, as if it were happening now, paradoxically underwrites its absence: the atomic obliteration is no longer present in its immediacy and fullness at the storytelling scene... the meanings of the survivors' texts can never be agreed on; rather, they constitute an infinite chain of signification..."¹¹

Chapter One examines the ways that Japan has sought to cast light on Hiroshima through numerous legal and institutional means in the postwar era; the national memory that formed was a result of the social and geopolitical conditions under the US Occupation, which undoubtedly influenced the politically charged position of Hiroshima as both a symbol of universal peace and as a symbol of Japan's revisionist history. Chapter Two analyses the films 'Barefoot Gen' and 'Akira'; two animated productions created in the 1980s; the decade reflects the country's larger ideology during this era of postmodernity and its twin cultures of violence and pacifism through anime. Chapter Three examines acclaimed director Akira Kurosawa's canon of nuclear films with special emphasis on 'Dreams', as well as the psychological drama 'Woman in the Mirror', produced in 2002, which documents the continuing question of identity for survivors and future generations on a personal and national landscape.

¹¹ Yoneyama, Lisa. *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*. Berkeley, UNITED STATES: University of California Press, 1999, 92



Cloud rising over Hiroshima. For many Americans, this image would come to symbolize the triumph over Japan's 'military' defeat.¹²

¹² National Archives, "Atomic Bomb Cloud over Hiroshima." (Accessed October 1st, 2018)

Chapter One: Hiroshima, 'The Mushroom Cloud'

*Hiroshima, however, was the beginning of, as well as the end to, something.*¹⁵

The tragedy of the atomic bomb stunned the world to the degree that Hiroshima no longer has come to symbolize a place, but an idea.¹⁶ Many to this day, particularly those in the United States, associate Hiroshima with the image of a 'large mushroom cloud, ruined cityscapes, and numbers of abstract 'casualties.'¹⁷ For Japan, the peculiar vortex of time in which Japan entered following its 'unconditional surrender' heavily impacted the way the Japanese came to terms with the bomb. In the context of the phantom democracy imposed by the United States during this milieu, the suffering of the long-drawn out war, and the calamity of the bomb itself, citizens experienced a strange current of victimhood that, to an effect, also utilized Hiroshima as a symbol. Yoneyama alludes to the obtuse way we have come to regard the bomb in 'Hiroshima Traces', where she discusses how Hiroshima as a 'temporally fixed sign' has become remembered from the 'transcendent and anonymous position of humanity.'¹⁸ According to Yoneyama, our perception of Hiroshima renders it 'all-absorbing as it conflates countless particulars into a single totality in the name of peace.'¹⁹ In this case, the symbol was of tragedy uniquely Japanese. This narrative risks neglect of the survivors, also known as hibakusha, because it has historically wrought political qualms over Japan's tendency to revise history.

¹⁵ John Whittier Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 15.

¹⁶ Treat, *Writing Ground Zero: Japanese Literature and the Atomic Bomb*, 29

¹⁷ John W. Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, *Diplomatic History*, Volume 19, Issue 2, 1 March 1995, 290

¹⁸ Lisa Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space, and the Dialectics of Memory*, (University of California Press, 1999), 15

¹⁹ "Ibid."

Censorship through a Democratic Bureaucracy: US Occupation 1945 - 1952

In all of humanity's sad history of genocide and atrocities, only the hibakusha were not allowed to publicly grieve or treat the war dead as tragic victims in the immediate aftermath of atomic destruction. Under the leadership of General Douglas MacArthur, proclaimed Supreme Commander of the Allied Pacific (SCAP), the U.S. Occupation of Japan (1945-1952) was concerned with making sure the nation would "never again be inclined to war." Through the two-pronged approach of demilitarization and demobilization as highlighted in the Potsdam Declaration, McArthur sought to 'liberate the consciousness' of the people by rewriting the constitution, demobilizing the police, changing the education curriculum, abolishing state Shinto, and censoring the press. Writing about the atomic-bomb experience was not explicitly proscribed, and in the year or so following the surrender, especially in local publications in the Hiroshima area, a number of writers were able to publish poetry and prose on the subject. However, many bomb-related writings were severely cut, and the most moving English-language publication on the subject - John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, an emotional depiction of six survivors published in *The New Yorker* 1946 - though mentioned in the media, could not be published in translation until 1949.²⁰ As the Occupation increasingly cracked down on policing new taboos, "a combination of outright censorship and widespread self-censorship led to the virtual disappearance of writings about the atomic-bomb experience until the end of 1948."²¹

Censorship of bomb material was part of the wider Allied aim to bring the Japanese to their knees. In Allied eyes, "the Japanese had simply reaped what they had sown."²² The terror

²⁰ Hersey, John. "Hiroshima," August 24, 1946. The 30,000 word article had a profound impact on the way the international community came to view the atomic bomb.

²¹ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War 2* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 414

²² Ibid.

bombing of Japanese cities, culminating in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, was seen as an appropriate retribution for the atrocities Japan had inflicted on other countries throughout Asia and the Pacific. SCAP also sought to present the image that the United States had deployed the bomb for the sole reason as to ensure Japan's 'unconditional' surrender; it avoided media portrayals that emphasized civilian rather than military casualties. This was in accordance with President Truman's speech, where he was quick to put importance to Japan's military, not tragic, defeat.²³

The historian John Dower, whose book on Japan during the US Occupation won the Pulitzer in 2000, says:

In these circumstances, survivors of the bombs found it exceedingly difficult to reach out to one another for comfort, or to tell others what nuclear war meant at the human level. Beyond this, overt censorship extended to scientific writings. Many reports concerning the effects of the blasts and ensuing radiation could not be made public until the closing months of the occupation. For over six years, Japanese scientists and doctors - and even some American scientists in Hiroshima and Nagasaki who were conducting research on radiation effects - were denied access to data that might have assisted them in communicating to and helping atomic bomb victims.²⁴

The curious parameters that SCAP perpetuated in accordance with their wider aim of demilitarizing Japan may be seen as a form of 'semantic imperialism'. It was under the guise of democracy that the United States imposed upon the Japanese strict censorship, so as to alter the popular consciousness of the people. It in part explains the seemingly muted response of the Japanese towards the bomb, for the propaganda and censorship imposed on them worked

²³Harry Truman, "August 6, 1945: Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-bomb at Hiroshima". 1945. Presidential Speeches. UVA Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/august-6-1945-statement-president-announcing-use-bomb>

²⁴ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War 2* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000), 414

astonishingly well to the degree that after SCAP left, over time, many non-Japanese including Americans came to regard such attitudes as peculiarly Japanese.²⁵

In another essay titled ‘The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory,’ Dower argues that censorship of the media was also controlled by Japan’s own imperial government until the first American victors arrived.²⁶ Notably, the government did not begin to offer special assistance to bomb survivors until after the Occupation ended, in 1952. It also did not establish its own research council to survey the survivors until the end of 1953. Thus, Japan as well as the United States, enforced the isolation surrounding the victims. On a societal level, this was due to the stigmatization of the bomb on the survivors; most were psychologically if not physically, deformed from the effects of the blast and radiation. It is also important to account the fact that much has been feared to have been lost in the chaotic hellishness that occupied Hiroshima for months after the bomb dropped: the obliteration of whole neighbourhoods, along with the records pertaining to their residents, hasty mass cremations of victims to prevent disease; and the absence of clear, coordinated, publicly accessible records of subsequent hibakusha illnesses and deaths. The result is a callous early history of neglect.

In retrospect, arguably one of the most gaping holes of the 20th century was the failure to seriously consider Hiroshima as genocide, if not a crime against humanity, despite the totality of its logistical and calculated near annihilation of the civilian population. Part of this was due to a number of postwar intellectuals, both Western and non-Western, who perceived the atomic destruction as “universal offenses against human civilization and not simply as particular attacks against a people that had been named as the enemy.”²⁷ The result was that, as Yoneyama asserts,

²⁵ Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War 2*, 440

²⁶ Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory*, *Diplomatic History*, Volume 19, Issue 2, 1 March 1995, 276

²⁷ Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 12

“remembering the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as events in the history of humanity has significantly contributed to the forgetting of the history of colonialism and racism in the region.”²⁸ Moreover, although analogies may be drawn between Japan’s Hiroshima and Germany’s Holocaust, critical differences between the two have led to stark departures in the way scholars have addressed remembering the events. While intellectual discussion around the Holocaust focused “recognition and mourning for a loss – a loss of origins and innocence, which was produced out of the specific moment of European modernity, fascism, and genocide,” Japanese memory came to be shaped almost exclusively by the “perception that ordinary Japanese people had been the passive victims of historical conditions.”²⁹ Yoneyama accounts this result as due to postwar scholarship of Japan that emphasized the gap between modern democratic ideals and practices, and the insufficient maturity of Japan’s people and institutions. Unlike Germany, where intellectuals “placed the memories of Nazism and the Holocaust in...relation to the liberal European traditions of republicanism, Enlightenment thought, and modernity”, intellectuals for Japan focused squarely on the activities of wartime leaders and their supporters alone for pre-war and wartime disasters.”³⁰ In brief, Hiroshima differs from Auschwitz because the world has come to remember the latter in a formula that perhaps most insightfully, captures the understanding of the Holocaust in full; Hiroshima memories, however, has been obstructed by not only institutional forms that laws and policies for postwar reparations have taken, but by the ways it has been intellectually addressed.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 11

³⁰ Ibid.

Legal, Educative, and Public Retribution for the Hibakusha: 1952 - onwards

With the end of the US Occupation in 1952, reactions against Hiroshima began to take shape and form. Sixty Japanese organizations, including women, labour, youth, and Hibakusha (survivor) groups - with a total of 2.5 million members - came together to form the Japan Council Against Atomic Bombs.³¹ In 1954, Japanese housewives created a petition to ban all nuclear weapons; it soon collected an astonishing 30 million signatures. The relaxation of censorship in 1948, coinciding with the end of the Tokyo Trials - which tried numerous Japanese officials for war crime atrocities - paved the way for the Japanese Heiwa Undo (Peace Movement) 1949 - 1950. Growing Japanese recognition of the tragedy of Hiroshima coincided with the apex of the nuclear arms race; the Soviet Union at this time was detonating its first bomb, President Truman had threatened use of nuclear weapons in Korea November 1950, and China was leaning towards Communist influence. In tandem, Japan was undergoing a perceived 'reverse course', where beginning in July 1950, rearmament of the military and indefinite maintenance of US bases in Okinawa. With this in mind, it is understandable then that the antinuclear movement could not avoid being coloured in politics. Such external pressures forced the public to confront the crisis of a possible third world war; the Japanese in particular, who had suffered the most from the nuclear consequences, began to cultivate a strong pacifist ideology that is present today.

In Japan, there was a strong anxiety to foster an antinuclear consciousness among the Japanese people, in particular the younger generation who had no experience of the war. The rise of "peace education" thus grew in response to helping young people live in a nuclear age; whereas before the war education was based on nationalism and militarism espoused by the Emperor's apparent divinity, post-war education stressed a democracy and peace that was

³¹ Inez Hedges, "Amnesiac Memory: Hiroshima/Nagasaki in Japanese Film"; *World Cinema and Cultural Memory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, 44

backed by the Japanese Constitution of 1946 and the Fundamentals of Education Law.³² Peace education flourished from 1951 onwards, as the Occupation ended and censorship on Atomic Bomb experiences in the school classroom was removed. Examples ranged from the movement among Hiroshima middle school children to erect the Statue of the Atomic Bomb Children beginning in 1955, to compiling 105 compositions by boys and girls on their experiences in Hiroshima, which crystallized into the book *Genbaku no Ko* (Children of the Atomic Bomb).³³ In both Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the main agents of spreading Peace Education were the teachers who were themselves hibakusha. Under associations particular to each city, the hibakusha teachers compiled independent teaching materials drawn from their own experiences; this did much to diffuse and deepen peace education in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Justice through legal framework was also pursued. In 1963, the District court of Tokyo ruled that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki violated international law. Internationally, it established the first judicial decision on the use of nuclear weapons. It also provided a voice for the Hibakusha, who in this case compromised five plaintiffs, a legal platform for retribution. The plaintiffs sought compensation for the injuries that they had sustained either to their person or to members of their immediate families.³⁵ The court held that the atomic bombs were unlawful because the attacks did not distinguish between military and civilian targets, and caused large unnecessary suffering.

³² The 1946 Japanese Constitution “forever renounced war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as means of settling international disputes.”

³³ Eisei Ishikawa and David L. Swain, trans., *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 596

³⁵ “National Implementation of IHL - Shimoda Case (Compensation Claim against Japan Brought by the Residents of Hiroshima & Nagasaki), Tokyo District Court, 7 December 1963.” Accessed April 18, 2019.

As history has progressed, more measures and denunciation over the use of atomic warfare has become more pronounced. In 1961 for example, the UN General Assembly denounced atomic warfare as “intrinsically illegal”, as it would “exceed even the scope of the war and cause indiscriminate suffering and destruction to mankind and civilization”.³⁶ However, the General Assembly failed to come up with a policy of ensuring that nuclear war would be prevented. To this day, nuclear proliferation is for the most part largely condemned by most nations, but treaties or customary rules to prohibit the threat or use of the weapons themselves have transpired.

Assessing the Various Responses of the hibakusha

In Hiroshima, immediately after the bombing, “some survivors came upon uninjured American POWs (they had been confined in underground cells) and beat them to death.”³⁷ But this act of rage was one small, recorded response in an otherwise astonishingly predominant Japanese attitude of awe and bewilderment. During the chaotic interlude between the bomb-dropping and Japan’s capitulation, “rage dissipated quickly in the face of the urgent challenges of recovery - and, indeed, simply daily survival.”³⁸ In the early months after Japan fell on September 2nd, 1945, the general feeling was more of widespread weariness and numbness; civilians had been deceived by their Emperor; they had been instructed to fight with bamboo sticks in face of America’s awesome nuclear might, and were thus doomed from the start. The proclaimed ‘holy war’ was devastating for Japan; nearly three million soldiers, sailors, and civilians were killed in

³⁶ The U.N. General Assembly Res. 1653 (XVI) adopted by a vote of 55-20-26 (roll call).

³⁷ John W. Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, Diplomatic History, Volume 19, Issue 2, 1 March 1995, 277

³⁸ “Ibid.”

the 15 years the country engaged in its 'Great East-Asian War' (1937 – 45), and a total of sixty-five cities including Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been bombed.³⁹

Furthermore, in the immediate years following the bombing, only the West quickly evolved to regard it an act of atrocity, whilst the Japanese saw the atomic bomb more as an act of god. Donald Richie, a historian noted for his analysis on Japanese cinema, expounded on this mind-set in a 1961 essay; he wrote about the 'uniquely Japanese attitude' in which survivors came to appropriate about the atomic bomb as a symbol.⁴⁰ In his essay - the first English language writing to assess the specific genre of film which deals with the atomic bombings - Richie explains Japanese attitude to their inherent belief in 'Mono No Aware', a near Buddhism awareness of the transience of things and the ephemerality of life.⁴¹ While there is no direct translation of Mono No Aware, in regards to attitudes about Hiroshima, Richie says: "This happened; it is all over and finished, but isn't it too bad? Still this world is a transient place and this too is sad; what we feel today we forget tomorrow; this is not as it perhaps should be, but it is as it is."⁴² Thus, Hiroshima the symbol was considered by the Japanese as not an 'atrocity' but a 'tragedy'.⁴³ To put into comparison, the same is not often said about the Holocaust, which is firstly and rightly associated with the words 'atrocity.'

That the Japanese viewed Hiroshima as a tragedy had particular consequences for the way they remembered history. It was evident that they viewed it particularly 'natural,' as Treat explains:

³⁹ John W. Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, 249

⁴⁰ Donald Richie, "Mono No Aware", 22; Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema (London; New York : Kegan Paul International, 1996)*

⁴¹ Introduction, Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema (London; New York : Kegan Paul International, 1996)*, 4

⁴² Donald Richie, "Mono No Aware", 22; Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema (London; New York : Kegan Paul International, 1996)*

⁴³ Ibid.

“Assaulted by light and sound and heat that seemed to come out of nowhere, how could they focus on what and whom is produced, ordered, and executed such massive power in order to hate them? It is the conspicuous lack of conventional malice and vengeance that, in part, distinguishes the start of the nuclear age. It is an age not enjoined by emotions of epics, the stuff of storytelling from the beginning of our literacy, but rather one effectively voided of them.”⁴⁴

In effect, the Japanese had no words in the initial disaster. The destructiveness of the bomb was so awesome that many Japanese initially regarded them – much like the calamitous moving war itself – almost as if they were a natural disaster.⁴⁵ US crackdown in eliminating allusions or references to American crimes committed, helped cultivate this sense of tragedy as being specifically Japanese. Later, tense Cold War relations during the 1950s would also help brew the ‘pacifist’ consensus in Japan, where left wing nationalists would contradictorily promote peace through this narrative of “victim consciousness.”⁴⁶ According to Dower, as individuals or grass-root movements ritualized this act of remembering, they risked a ‘gross politicization of remembrance.’⁴⁷

Dower argues that out of this complex web, a new form of nationalism emerged from the popular consciousness that Japan, as a victim of the atomic bombs coupled with unconditional surrender, had gone through a fundamentally Japanese tragedy. But such considerations leave out the survivors of the atomic bombs themselves. The Hibakusha were to be excluded from this new-found narrative that Japan entered when the war ended.... psychologically if not physically, they were deformed reminders of a miserable past. Another fact was the realization that in Hiroshima there could be no resistance. Once again, Treat contrasts the atrocity of Hiroshima with Auschwitz, where in the concentration camps, there were instances where the Jewish tried

⁴⁴ Treat, *Writing Ground Zero*, 17

⁴⁵ John W. Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, 277.

⁴⁶ Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, 291

⁴⁷ Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, 292

to subvert direct control; numerous memoirs and literature have attested this. But in Hiroshima... “there was not only no time for such gestures but no knowledge or much less contact with the victimizer, how could such existentialist acts even be contemplated?”⁴⁸

It was not until three or four years later that people began to visualize the human consequences of Hiroshima in vivid, concrete ways. In 1950, the artists Maruki Toshi and Maruki Iri, published a series of paintings depicting the bomb blast in Hiroshima. The wife and husband had rushed to Hiroshima three days after the bomb, in search for relatives. The booklet of paintings, titled pika-don (meaning flash-bang, the euphemism many would associate with the peculiar way the atomic bomb lit up the landscape before blasting), would be the first graphic representation of the bomb in Japan. Visually, the representation of the bomb stands in stark contrast to photographs taken at the scene. Most textual and visual recounts allude that ‘the closest existing approximation to the experience on August 6th...was to be found in medieval writings and pictorial scrolls depicting the horrors of the Buddhist hell.’⁴⁹ In the Maruki’s paintings, for instance, the fire that consumed the men, women, and children in Hiroshima was painted in the same manner and style as those on Buddhist scrolls; the images of charred bodies rolling out in procession like ghosts in the underworld, the contorted corpses being tossed into the atomic flame, the faceless dead.

⁴⁸ Treat, *Writing Ground Zero*, 17

⁴⁹ John W. Dower, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory*, 287



“Fire” by Iri and Toshi Maruki.⁵⁰ Along with the panel, is the description:

"PIKA!" The blue-white light of the flash
the explosion--
the force--
the heat wave--
Never in heaven or on earth
had humankind experienced this.

The paintings revealed a space for the Hibakusha that captured what special form of knowledge about what they endured, which the rest of the world did not have access to. This came despite the hibakusha's proclaimed need to render factually accurate historical representations of the text. According to the historian Lisa Yoneyama, this desire is called a 'mimetic impulse', which asserted the need to deny the presence of any elements that might indicate their works' affinities with literary fiction, including the use of tropes, similes, aestheticization, and other rhetorically sophisticated devices.⁵¹ As we will see in the ensuing chapters, capturing the atomic bomb experience engenders scepticism not only about the self-evident world, but about reality itself.⁵²

⁵⁰ "Maruki Gallery For The Hiroshima Panels." Accessed April 17, 2019.

⁵¹ Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 212

⁵² Ibid.

Chapter Two: Japan's Post-Nuclear Anxieties as Reflected in 'Barefoot Gen' and 'Akira'

The following chapter is devoted to showing how the experiences of the hibakusha manifested in Japanese popular culture, specifically through the animated films 'Barefoot Gen' (1983) and 'Akira' (1988), as they sought to grapple with portraying the atomic bomb. These films have been chosen for their anime format, a particularly Japanese trait in which the manga canon was arguably influenced by the twin nuclear holocausts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; as discussed in greater detail later, the effect of the nuclear bomb on Japan gave rise to unique traits in Japanese anime post 1950s, with recurring themes of orphaned kids, the destruction of nature, and misuse of technology. One notable example is the oeuvre of Hayao Miyazaki; his animated films often refer to the abuse of technology, and contains please for human restraint. 'Barefoot Gen', however, is notable for starkly depicting the experiences of the hibakusha through an animated medium that conventional films could not accurately capture; 'Akira' goes deeper in that it's strange confluence of postmodern, horror, and pastiche, themes reflect a stirring underneath the conventional narrative. It is worthwhile to note that 'Barefoot Gen' stands alone for not only its faithful recreation of the hibakusha experience in the immediate aftermath of the bomb, but for its pacifist stance that did not forgo the Japanese' own wartime accountability. 'Akira' on the other hand, partook in the fascination for violence that came to characterize Japanese anime; furthermore, Japan's film industry itself engendered a "traumatic fascination" with the effects of nuclear radiation, spawning monstrous creatures such as Tetsuo of 'Akira', and Gojira (Godzilla).⁵³

⁵³ Thomas Lamarre, "Akira and Capitalist Modes of Destruction", *Duke University Press, Volume 16, Number 1 Spring 2008*, 140

“Unreal Reality”: Capturing the Immediate Experience of Hiroshima

Since the 1960s, Japanese anime has produced memorable depictions of the war, with ‘Barefoot Gen’ (Hadashi no Gen) in 1983 arguably the most faithful recreation of the atomic bombing.⁵⁴ The film was conceived from the autobiographical manga series written by Nakazawa Keiji, a hibakusha who was six years old when the bomb fell on Hiroshima. Directed by Mori Mazaki, the film is a ‘perfect’ representation of the epicentre through the eyes of Gen, the young child who loses his father, sister, and brother to the bomb. The climactic scene arrives thirty minutes into an otherwise tranquil, if not mundane, realistic exposition into the day-to-day lives of Gen and his family. But from the moment ‘Little Boy’ is depicted being dropped unto the city, Mazaki abandons the animated realism and induces the viewer into a nightmarish world where time at first stops still, before descending into a five-minute portrayal of what in reality, the bomb destroyed in seconds. The subsequent sequences are disturbing: a little girl clutching a balloon is incinerated on the spot, her eyeball melting gruesomely from her skull, a mother and her child shrivel into a foetal position, an old man and a dog melt before the glare. Here, Mizaki chooses to linger on each individual’s death so as to show the human, rather than architectural, impact of the bomb’s total destruction. Viewers are forced to become intimate with each death, faced with the victims’ frozen expressions of horror and shock as they shrivel upon the earth. In doing so, Mazaki removes the obstructions that the infamous ‘Hiroshima the Mushroom Cloud’ has come to symbolize, and brings the narrative to the suffering of the hibakusha.

Like the Maruki paintings, ‘Barefoot Gen’ also introduces the atomic bomb experience as resembling a Buddhist hell. In the film, the destruction is accompanied by an assault of light, colour, and sound, blending together into an apocalyptic nightmare. The dead

⁵⁴ Linda C. Ehrlich “The Extremes of Innocence: Kurosawa’s Dreams and Rhapsodies” in Mick Broderick, ed., *Hibakusha Cinema* (London: Keegan Paul International), 25

come slowly towards Gen as if on a death march; their eyes unseeing, skin melting off their fingertips as they walk past with their arms outstretched. The buildings collapse in a spectacular myriad of colours, everything is pulverized. The camera then pans out and above the city, following the nuclear clouds of smoke billow upwards into the heavens - before freezing into the infamous image taken from U.S. surveillance of the atomic bomb – the symbol we have come to associate with Hiroshima. Mizaki's message could not have been clearer. By wielding together art and life, he breaks through the veil to remind viewers that though this be an animated film, what took place happened, lest we forget. The ensuing twenty mins of action follows Gen and his mother as they watch their family die in the nuclear flames and journey to safety; the film remains true to Nakazawa's manga, as well as to the author's personal account:

“There were still bodies lying about. In every tank of fire-fighting water people had jumped in and were dead. What surprised me the most was that right to the end they'd exhibited human emotions: out of love, a mother held her child tight. Her corpse was bloated, swollen from being in the water, and the child's face was sunk into the mother's flesh. When I approached Dobashi's busy streets, corpses filled every water tank. That's where the pleasure quarter was—they'd all probably still been asleep when the bomb hit. So engulfed in flames, many of them must have jumped into the water tanks. My oldest brother and I decided to return through the city, and Hiroshima's seven rivers were all full of bodies. As I depicted it in the manga, the bellies were all swollen. Gas developed, and the bellies broke open because of the gas. Water poured into those holes, and the corpses sank.”⁵⁵

The very 'unreal' nature of 'Barefoot Gen's animated format, constructed entirely by hand and computerized video art, is better suited at capturing the subjective accounts of the survivors, most who reported the sense of an 'eerie unreality' they found themselves thrown into. John Lifton, an American psychiatrist who studied the immediate psychological effects of the atomic bomb on hibakusha at the time of the explosion, concluded that many experienced a sense

⁵⁵ Interview with Nakazawa Keiji, Asia Pacific Journal

of personal disintegration with the bomb akin to a sense of “world-collapse”.⁵⁶ Talking about the atomic bomb experience, Lifton described two characteristics he ascertained from surveying hibakusha: a sudden immersion in death, and a ‘psychic closing-off.’ According to Lifton, this sudden and pervasive feeling of death in life rendered any sense of meaning to the point that “life and death were out of phase with one another, no longer properly distinguishable – which lent an aura of weirdness and unreality to the entire city.”⁵⁷ This is evident in *Barefoot Gen*, which depicted the hibakushas’ subjective perspective of time slowing to a stop, before erupting into a rapid sequence of buildings breaking into pieces as they rise up in the sky, and of the ground splitting open. Mizaki’s close up shots of the faces too, reveal how the hibakushas’ sense of individual and group death dominated all other emotions – including confusion, helplessness, and abandonment.



Stills taken from ‘Barefoot Gen.’ Mizaki’s depiction is similar to one hibakusha’s description of the aftermath: “The outsiders could not grasp the fact that they were witnessing the exodus of people who walked in the realm of dreams.”⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Robert Jay. Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 23

⁵⁷ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 23

⁵⁸ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 25

Lifton would go on to conclude that those who survived the atomic bomb experienced:

“The indelible imprint of death immersion, which forms the basis of what we shall later see to be a permanent encounter with death; the fear of annihilation of self and of individual identity, along with the sense of having virtually experienced that annihilation, destruction of the non-human environment, of the field or context of one’s own existence, and therefore of one’s overall sense of ‘being in the world’ and the replacement of the natural order of living and dying with an unnatural order of death dominated life.”⁵⁹

Thus, in the immediate aftermath of the bomb, the hibakusha experienced a state of ‘dreamed reality’, one peopled by “walking ghosts.”⁶⁰ Part of this aura was the ‘deathly silence’ consistently reported by survivors. Rather than wild panic, most described a ghastly stillness and a sense (whether or not literally true) of slow-motion: low moans from those incapacitated, the rest fleeing from destruction, but usually not rapidly, toward the rivers, toward where they thought their family members might be, or toward where they hoped to find authorities or medical personnel, or simply toward accumulations of other people, in many cases merely moving along with a gathering human mass and with no clear destination.⁶¹

If Barefoot Gen evokes the experience of the hibakushas complete immersion in death, ‘Akira’ focuses on the subliminal effects the atomic bomb had on survivors. Released in 1989 for the Japanese youth, Akira is set in a post-apocalyptic Neo-Tokyo, a grim dystopian world plagued by corruption and gang violence. In summation, the basic story of Akira is relatively straightforward: a teenage gang member, Tetsuo Shima, acquires telekinetic abilities after a motorcycle crash with a prematurely aged child, who had escaped from a secret government project. As Tetsuo’s power grows, he becomes increasingly unstable, first killing his fellow gang members, before mutating into a pulsing, part-flesh, part-metal entity that threatens to destroy all

⁵⁹ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 30

⁶⁰ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 25

⁶¹ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 25

of Tokyo. The film ends ambiguously, with the explosion of test subject Akira of which the movie is named after. Akira turns into an expanding orb of light similar to the one in the beginning of the film, which obliterates the surrounding city.

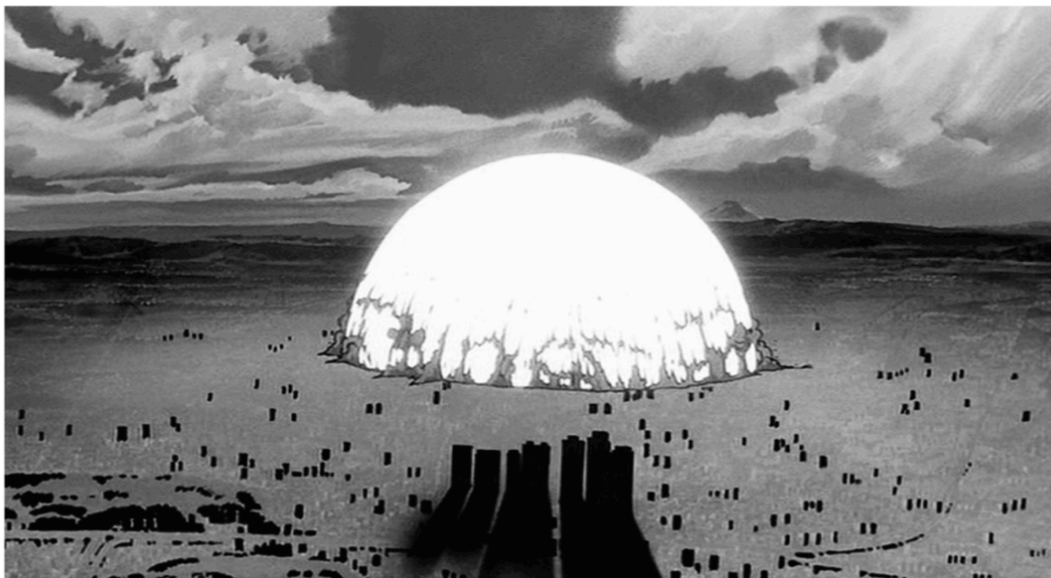
In Akira, a critical moment is in the astonishing opening sequence of the film, which depicts an obliteration of a city by some sort of detonation. As the camera pans to take in more and more of the distant city, there is the sound of wind on the otherwise silent soundtrack, and then a dome of alternating black and white appears in the middle of the city. It expands larger and larger until the screen is eclipsed in whiteness, setting up the context for the rest of the story. According to Frieda Freiberg, this opening sequence represents the sublime; the white and silent screen is “a representation of an experience that is unrepresentable in image or sound – in marked contrast to the otherwise hysterical excess of sound and imagery in the rest of the film.”⁶³

‘Akira’ presents the destruction as arresting in its beauty, using visual and auditory effects to create a hushed, almost reverent atmosphere, as the viewer looks on in disbelief. As mentioned earlier, this cosmic sense of terror was felt among those who experienced Hiroshima; one survivor noted, “only those at some distance from the explosion could clearly distinguish the sequence of the great flash of light accompanied by the lacerating heat of the fireball, then the sound and force of the blast, and finally the impressive multi-coloured cloud rising high above the city. This awesome spectacle was not without beauty.”⁶⁴

⁶³ Frieda Freiberg, “Akira and the Postnuclear Sublime,” 95; Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema* (London; New York : Kegan Paul International, 1996)

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, 30



A still from the opening sequence of 'Akira', depicting the nuclear annihilation of Tokyo.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Katsuhiro Otomo. *Akira*. Tokyo Movie Shinsha, 1988.

The film's opening sequence thus captures one aspect of what it must have felt like at the time, and in subsequent hibakusha memories: an experience that eluded both apprehension and perception; the sublime.

Visually and technologically superior to 'Barefoot Gen', 'Akira' extolled the virtues of being a science fiction film, which itself is concerned with the "aesthetics of destruction, with the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess."⁶⁶ Reading 'Akira' as a science fiction film, which it is, one understands the lure of natural disaster imagery which the SF film has become known for; Susan Sontag aptly noted this in her 1965 essay, 'The Imagination of Disaster.' Though primarily preoccupied with the aesthetics of science fiction films, Sontag also taps into a wider truth about the science fiction films that Akira emulates, saying:

"Ours is indeed an age of extremity. For we live under continual threat of two equally fearful, but seemingly opposed, destinies: unremitting banality and inconceivable terror. It is fantasy, served out in large rations by the popular arts, which allow most people to cope with these twin spectres. For one job that fantasy can do is to lift us out of the unbearably humdrum and to distract us from terrors – real or anticipated – by an escape into exotic, dangerous situations which have last minute happy endings. But another of the things that fantasy can do is to normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby injuring us to it. In one case, fantasy beautifies the world. In the other, it neutralizes it."⁶⁷

Akira and its spectacular opening sequence attests to these tensions wrought by fantasy – it symbolizes the "peculiar beauties" that total annihilation brings, as well as the horrors of obliteration itself.⁶⁸ Freda Freiberg correlates this argument when she says, "but somehow the explosion of nuclear power figures as a catharsis, a solution to all those other issues, a consummation devoutly wished, and the ultimate experience of the sublime for the young generation of Japanese."⁶⁹ Akira's ending also attests to this, where another (nuclear) explosion destroys Neo-Tokyo and the screen fades to white once more. Imagery of the cosmos and stars

⁶⁶ Susan Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*, Hibakusha Cinema, Kegan Paul International 1996, 41

⁶⁷ Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*, 52

⁶⁸ Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*, 41

⁶⁹ Freiberg, "Akira and the Postnuclear Sublime," 96

flash across the screen, before one of the protagonists, the young Tetsuo, whispers “I am Tetsuo.” Beyond the spiritual allusions present, the ending clearly paints and perpetrates the idea that a violently sublime cleansing will wipe every slate clean. Thus, the politics of desire are present in ‘Akira’, where mass destruction appears to produce a desire to “get closer” to it... it produces a strange assortment of the sensations “habitation, fascination, and addiction.”⁷⁰ Thus, because it simultaneously presents itself as the source of seduction to the observer, Sontag concludes that science fiction films like Akira, which seek to both “accommodate and negate” mass trauma such as nuclear warfare, is “above all the emblem of an inadequate response.”⁷¹

‘Barefoot Gen’, ‘Akira’, and the Politics of Memory

The argument thus far is that in Barefoot Gen and Akira, both films had critical scenes which accurately conveyed the idea that the atomic bomb experience was of a psychic, ‘alternate reality.’ In that way, they tapped into a truth about the hibakusha experience and managed to transmit it out into popular culture. But both films are also notable for the way they facilitated and exemplified the post nuclear world Japan entered after 1945. As figures of popular culture, they represented the way the atomic bomb marked an original trauma that then manifested into a certain A-bomb anxiety, which became a symbol of Japan’s postmodern age. Both films thus represent the different ways Japan has historically struggled with their inability to construct a narrative that speaks to the experience of the hibakusha.

Barefoot Gen is one incipient narrative of Japan’s post-war anxiety. What at first seems to be an anti-American message soon reveals itself as a critique not of the bombing itself, but the militarism and hunger for power that led Japan into war and made its citizens vulnerable. This is

⁷⁰ Lamarre, “Akira and Capitalist Modes of Destruction”, 132

⁷¹ Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*, 52

evident in Gen's father, a proclaimed pacifist who prior to the bombing, says to Gen and his brother, "Japan has all but lost the war. Why? Because our government is run by mad men...they are just stupid and crazy, all of them... this war can't be right... sometimes it takes a lot more courage not to fight then to fight. To not want to kill when all around you is calling for blood. That is real courage, in my book."⁷² His death soon after cements his words into becoming a central theme of the movie, which is that war and militarism are cantankerous to the aims of a good society. Moreover, it is the innocent such as Gen's father, who took no part in the war, which suffer the consequences. Even the animation of the characters, whether intentionally or not, highlights the innocence of the children: Gen and the other kids are drawn with large, expressive features characteristic of the anime. In contrast, the dead and dying are portrayed with stark realism, whilst the Americans dropping Little Boy are drawn with harsh, lined strokes. Mazaki contrasts these different anime portrayals in single scenes, creating an unsettling nightmare of ubiquitous violence.

The final shot of the film promises growth and a new beginning, as symbolized by Gen spotting plants flourishing out of the wasted soil, and seeing his hair, which had fallen out from radiation, grow back. It ends with Gen making a boat to sail down the river, in honour of his late brother who he had promised he would sail a boat with. The viewer sees Gen, his mother, and his adopted brother watch the boat sail down the river, against a blood red backdrop of the Sun – a Japan rising from the ashes, stronger and more resolute in the face of adversity.

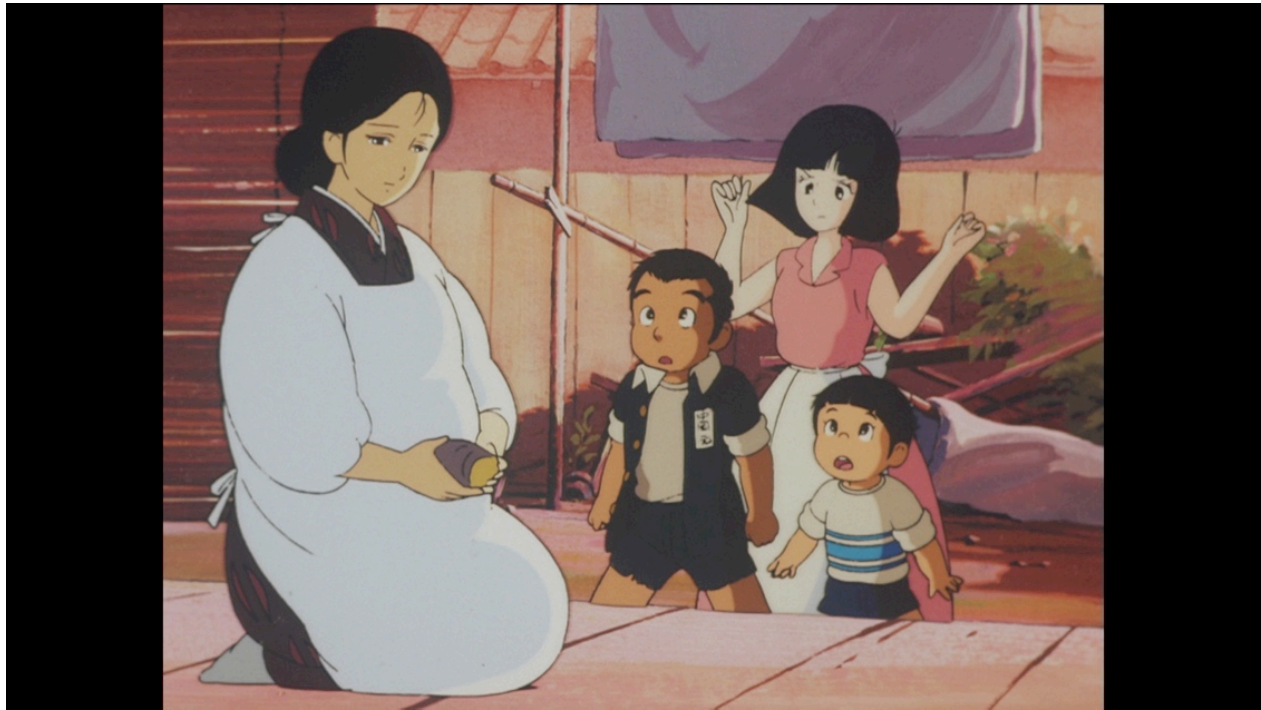
It is important to recognize that Barefoot Gen was a product of Japanese memory at time when the country was ascending onto the world stage as a vigorous proponent of peace and anti-militarism. Pacifism was therefore a marketable concept at this point, but more than that: it

⁷² Masaki, Mori. *Barefoot Gen*. Gen Production, 1983.

reflected a new wave of victim consciousness, where the sense of victimization became the “definitive moral impetus behind its new identity.”⁷³ Contrary to the original intent of Nakazawa Keiji, who blamed the country’s emperor system and military rule for the atomic bomb, Barefoot Gen the film was swept up by the masses to supplement a greater ideology of becoming a self-proclaimed ‘peace loving’ country. It enabled national memory to revert back to the obtuse Hiroshima symbol, the nuclear cloud, the iconic photograph captured by American forces from the sky. However, it is also important to recognize that Barefoot Gen stands “virtually alone” among them as works which recoil from the effects of war rather than relishing in them.⁷⁴

⁷³ Mikyong Kim, *Pacifism or Peace Movement? Hiroshima Memory Debates and Political Compromises* (Journal of International and Area Studies, Vol. 15, No.1 (June 2008), 64

⁷⁴ Crawford, *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, 83; Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema* (London; New York : Kegan Paul International, 1996)



Gen with his mother and siblings. The film has been praised for its poignant portrayal of the innocent during wartime Japan.⁷⁵

This national feeling of victimhood earlier discussed, was enough to exonerate Japan from previous offenses; it glossed over Japan's own acts of aggression towards its fellow Asian countries during the 'East Asian War.' One critical issue was the existence of foreign hibakusha; approximately 70,000 Koreans died in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁷⁸ As a colony of Japan during its 'Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere' (1930 -1945), Korea was a source of heavily forced and abused labour in wartime Japan. Initially invisible, the Japanese government was forced to reckon with Korean hibakusha during the 1970s, as the victims filed a series of lawsuits against the government for medical relief; local organizations such as the "Korean Atomic Bomb Victims Association of Hiroshima" were created to petition for inclusion of Korean hibakusha in

⁷⁵ Linda C. Ehrlich argues in her essay, 'The Extremes of Innocence', that Barefoot Gen stands as one of the more satisfactory historical representations of hibakusha.

⁷⁸ Mikyong Kim, *Pacifism or Peace Movement?* 67

Hiroshima's victimhood narrative.⁷⁹ And in 1991, the government had its first public announcement of the existence of Korean Hibakusha.⁸⁰ As Dower aptly puts, "these tensions – racial and ethnic bias and dual identity as victim and victimizer – never will be entirely resolved in Japan." Mikyoung Kim argues that Japan's government used this pacifist ideology to further their political agenda in the 1950s. As mentioned previously, the pacifist climate in Japan manifested in the early 1950s, during the US Occupation which organized the Japanese economy under Pax Americana. From a realpolitik perspective, pacifism enabled Japan to enjoy economic prosperity, so that the country arguably "gained wealth for the price of victimhood."⁸¹

'Akira' represents another avenue into Japan's politics of memory; whilst 'Barefoot Gen' exemplified a call for peace that arguably masks the country's military aggression, own destruction, and imperialistic dreams, 'Akira' revealed a culture of postmodernity that effectively also complicated Japan's efforts at remembering their nuclear trauma. The latter film may be read less as an "adequate" response to addressing Hiroshima, and instead more as an astonishing piece of work that reflects the dissonant and incongruent threads of national memory about the atomic bomb during the late twentieth century. Yoneyama paints a portrait of postmodernity in the pursuit of knowledge, where "knowledge has become alienated from being and is instead relentlessly turned into transportable, reproducible, exchangeable objects...this longing for totality and singularity has emerged simultaneously with an aspiration to recover the originary moment and lost collectivity."⁸² In 'Akira', politics of memory, or the pursuit of knowledge, has therefore surfaced into four main debates: an erasure and assertion of its nuclear origins, a desire

⁷⁹ Mikyoung Kim, *Pacifism or Peace Movement?* 71

⁸⁰ Mikyoung Kim, *Pacifism or Peace Movement?* 72

⁸¹ Mikyoung Kim, *Pacifism or Peace Movement?* 64

⁸² Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 31

to experience the nuclear sublime, a transmutability of meaning, and the cultivation of the 'bright' sensorium experience of the viewer.

The extremity of violence in 'Akira' is something worthwhile to note; the film was a product of the late 20th century, when Japanese animation had abandoned its post-war pacifism by the 1970s to become "probably the most violent category of visual culture ever produced."⁸³ 'Barefoot Gen,' made in 1983, stands as the lone example of a pacifist animated feature produced during this time. For indeed, the violence of Japanese cartoon properties is in itself a social phenomenon that has been attempted to trace back to its nuclear origins. Nicholas Bornoff articulates this by reflecting the country's culture of violence ranging from 'sado-masochistic live sex shows to pulp novels'; despite this, Japan's crime rate is low on a world scale.⁸⁴ He concludes that the citizens' free access to violent fantasy material, coupled with pacifism deriving from their Buddhist faith and Confucianism social codes of restraint, accounts for this.⁸⁵ 'Akira' marks the larger trend of mainstream popular culture which obsessed over a 'romanticized image of war'; Bryn Crawford argues that the shift towards cartoon properties of violent fantasies reflects the Japanese equivalent of Generation X, one characterized by an "all pervasive mass media, nihilism, mutation, and suicide."⁸⁶ Interestingly enough, Crawford posits that in this post-nuclear world, Japan's pacifist slogans as 'Never Again' are ironically undermined by existence of the 'violent delights' in the media which are uniquely Japanese.

⁸³ Ben Crawford, *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, 83

⁸⁴ Nicholas Bornoff, *Pink Samurai*, Grafton Books, London, 1992, 534

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Mick Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema*, 8

Crawford says:

“Even in a mediatised world in which the power of action has been defused, death survives, violence survives. Each development of technology, of business, of human expression, carries within it the destruction which can never be dissociated from life...”⁸⁷

In opening the story with a depiction of total nuclear destruction, *Akira* represents a post-nuclear, post end-of-the-world, and ultimately postmodern flux that Japan entered after Hiroshima. By doing so, *Akira* both asserts and effaces its nuclear origins, creating a text that cannot hold any deep meaning or anchor for unitary interpretation. Such depthlessness is characteristic of the postmodern aesthetic, which Frederic James identifies as: “loss of deep meaning, historical perspective, and psychological interiority.”⁸⁸ In many ways, *Akira* contained elements that was inherent of the postmodern text: as Susan Napier summarized, it’s rapid narrative pace, fascination with fluctuating identity, uses of the pastiche both in relation to Japanese history and different cinematic styles, and its ambivalent attitude towards history all recall the postmodern. The film’s plot itself is hard to discern for it contains a plethora of characters and a disjointed, almost incoherent narrative that is propelled by an almost kinetic force of energy through sound, light, and visual imagery.

⁸⁷ Ben Crawford, *Emperor Tomato Ketchup*, Cartoon Properties from Japan, page 90

⁸⁸ Christopher Bolton, *From Ground Zero to Degree Zero: Akira from Origin to Oblivion* (Mechademia, Vol. 9, Origins (2014)) University of Minnesota Press, 310



Kaneda bringing the shrinking ball of light into himself at the end of *Akira*. The ending seems to insinuates personal growth and self-illumination, but the neat resolution seems too trite in addressing the post-nuclear issues in the film.⁸⁹

The cyclical nature of death, birth, and death seems to be another prominent theme in the film, conveyed through light and dark imagery. The very nature of flux – of precarious existence that is destroyed and enabled to be reborn – represents the postmodern in that nothing is definite, or has an ending, rendering the question of what really matters. *Akira* conveys this through the finale, which is also full of light and dark energy. The film ends with Kaneda crouched amongst the ruins, cupping a tiny light which is all that remains of Tetsuo's explosion; Kaneda is cradling the cosmos of which Tetsuo, Akira, and the other test subjects are now in. Kaneda takes the ball of light into himself so that all the problems, and the personal illumination/realization disappears.

This 'happy' ending is a hallmark of the SF animated films that Susan Sontag talks about. But the 'new-age' transcendence it espouses, conveys nothing and does not resolve any of the

⁸⁹ Katsuhiro Otomo. *Akira*. Tokyo Movie Shinsha, 1988.

political and even spiritual issues that arise in the film. More revealing is the abundance of light imagery used in *Akira*, itself meaning ‘the light coming from the sun’; the stars, the galaxies, the way the screen fades to white at the beginning and end of the movie – these are the techniques meant to be comforting, but ultimately empty, to the viewer. This is arguably a product of postmodern culture which dominated Japan, Hiroshima specifically, after the war. Lisa Yoneyama also notes the culture of ‘brightness’ in post nuclear Japan, which she referred to as the “political economy of brightness,” given Hiroshima’s endeavour to create sanitized urban spaces in the re-development of the city. Yoneyama calls this the engineering of a ‘bright’ Hiroshima, of whose sentiments she described as “an obsessive desire for brightness, cheerfulness, and light-heartedness – all contribute to the cultural condition that privileges ‘atmosphere’ and images over substance, that constantly transforms knowledge into mass commodities, and that incessantly flattens and trivializes history.”⁹⁰

One might argue that ‘*Akira*’ radiates a form of historical amnesia that risks reinforcing the position of Japan as a victim. The film’s blanketed erasure of Neo-Tokyo signifies a tendency for Japan to forget its past, which enlightens scholarly discussion of the country being faulted for having a “victim mentality” and a “never-ending post war era”.⁹¹ As one scholar, Thomas Lamarre, put it, ‘*Akira*’ is a product of a nation that repeats “the traumatic event without any sense of historical or critical distance from it, precisely because the event remains incomprehensible.”⁹² Lamarre asserts that ‘*Akira*’ mirrors the post-war Japanese developmental state, in that the nation was in a “long post-war”⁹³ flux which manifested as an “empty repetition

⁹⁰ Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 63

⁹¹ Lamarre, 141

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Carol Gluck refers to Japan post 1945 as the “long post-war,” in “The Past in the Present,” *Postwar Japan as History*, ed. Andrew Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 64-95

of historical trauma: bomb and build, re-bomb and rebuild.”⁹⁴ Lamarre, however, sees ‘Akira’ as a work of art which has actively transgressed the barriers of historical amnesia and has successfully “worked through” the trauma to prevent future nuclear destructions from occurring. This is most evident in Lamarre’s argument about the historical trauma of Hiroshima and Nagasaki being concealed and repressed: “On the contrary, in the body of Tetsuo” Lamarre says, “Trauma has become a matter of inter-determinate potentiality... (the film) gives way to a generative mode that promises to transform the Japanese developmental state into something new.”

Chapter Three: Morality, Continuing Trauma, and Hibakusha Identity

*“Survivors must confront the fact that their witnessing of Hiroshima’s obliteration can never be reconstructed or conveyed in its original form.”*⁹⁵

The challenges in remembering and representing Hiroshima have continued in every decade, albeit evolving into different forms – or pathways – towards understanding the A-bomb experience. By the end of the 20th century, and in the early 2000s, the actual experience of Hiroshima had receded in time enough for a new opening up of artistic space, of which a new generation of Japanese filmmakers entered to grapple with the unrepresentable. The widening gap between Hiroshima and the Present are key themes that dominated the challenges of representing Hiroshima in this era; this is examined in two films, ‘Woman in the Mirror’ by Yoshishige Yoshida, and ‘Kurosawa’s Dreams’ by Akira Kurosawa. While the former is

⁹⁴ Lamarre, 141

⁹⁵ Yoneyama, Hiroshima Traces, 92

concerned with continuous personal identity formation for survivors, the latter is intent on impressing upon the viewer with a transcendent A-bomb nightmare that haunts the national landscape. Thus, the opposing narratives of moralism and fragmentation continue to run throughout addressing the Hiroshima question.

Akira Kurosawa's Nuclear Dreams and the question of Morality

*"Dreams revealed men's deepest thoughts, liberated in sleep."*⁹⁶

The end of the 20th century continued to bring new speculation about Hiroshima from national vantage point. In 1990, the acclaimed Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa (1910 – 1998), produced 'Akira Kurosawa's Dreams', a film of magical realism composed of eight vignettes based on the director's recurring dreams. 'Dreams' was created towards the tail end of Kurosawa's career after a 45-year span in filmmaking; the movie was viewed by many as an unexpected, if not cathartic, burst of creative energy that the director envisioned before passing away in 1998 at the age of 88. 'Dreams' is at once deeply meditative, confounding and moralistic. Kurosawa alone wrote the screenplay, which he claimed was based entirely on dreams that he had had repeatedly over the years:

The impetus for 'Dreams' was a passage in a novel by Dostoyevsky, where he talks about dreams and the fact that they express our deepest fears and greatest hopes, and that this expression takes a shape which is something quite unimaginable and unexpected and unimaginable in daily life. So, I wrote down a

⁹⁶ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment: A Novel in Six Parts with Epilogue*. New York: Knopf, 1992.

paper a dream from my childhood, and this developed into a ‘collaboration’ with other dreams from various stages of my life.⁹⁷

Already by the title, one can infer that the atomic anxieties represented in ‘Dreams’ are those that reach far below the Japanese subconscious. In the vignettes ‘Mount Fuji in Red’, and ‘The Weeping Demon’, Kurosawa takes the legacy of human and natural destruction to nightmarish extremes in imagining an apocalypse that ends the atomic era. The narrative momentum and continuity in dreams as a whole is based on activities of searching, wandering, engaged in by the protagonist from childhood through adulthood. That action reaches a terminus when nuclear reactors explode at the base of Mount Fuji, a “traditional site of Japan’s cultural identity”.⁹⁸ After the nuclear explosions, the protagonist in the vignette is caught in a terrified flight of Japanese towards the Island’s coast. In the panic, one person clearly voices the inevitable: “Japan is so small there’s no escape.” In the next scene, the protagonist stands with only one other man in a business suit, and a woman and her small children over the cliff; thousands of people have already leapt into the ocean and are now at the bottom of the sea. The businessman’s speech in this scene is proselytizing: “Man’s stupidity is unbelievable,” he mourns.⁹⁹ As the protagonist seeks to fight off the ensuing nuclear clouds, coloured a nightmarish red, the businessman proclaims the absurdity of such ‘precautions’ and leaps from the cliff into his death.

⁹⁷ Kurosawa, Akira, and Cardullo, Bert. *Akira Kurosawa: Interviews. Conversations with Filmmakers Series*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. pp. 184.

⁹⁸ Goodwin, James. “Akira Kurosawa and the Atomic Age.” Hibakusha Cinema, November 5, 2013.

⁹⁹ *Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams* on iTunes. Accessed April 17, 2019.



The unnamed Dreamer is seen here with one of the humans who have mutated into horned demons as a result of radiation. Warped flowers stand menacingly above them, enveloped in a dystopian fog.¹⁰⁰

In the next episode, 'The Weeping Demon,' the protagonist wakes to a post-nuclear wasteland where nature has mutated into grotesque flora and fauna, both beautiful and menacing, and Japanese citizens have been disfigured into demonic creatures. The humans have now sprouted horns, which cause them so much agony that they howl constantly, yet they cannot die, which make them suffer eternally. The protagonist converses with one of the horned demons, who explains that in this world, they survive by eating one another. The vignette ends with the demon asking if the protagonist would like to become one of them as well, and the protagonist narrowly escapes by falling down the mountain.

¹⁰⁰ *Akira Kurosawa's Dreams* on iTunes. Accessed April 17, 2019.

It should be noted that 'Dreams' has been criticized for being moralizing and too simplistic to an almost insufferable degree; Audie Block says, "it is as if Kurosawa has lost faith in his audience's ability to understand all but the most blatantly presented message."¹⁰¹ Many critics, such as Linda Ehrlich, noted the difference in 'Dreams' and in his earlier film which deals with the atomic bomb, 'I Live in Fear' (1955). Also titled as, 'Record of a Living Being,' Kurosawa's 1955 film follows an elderly man, Kiichi Nakajima, trying to make his family emigrate to South America out of fear that Japan faces imminent nuclear disaster. Nakajima is so concerned with the threat of nuclear war in Japan that he burns his factory down to incentivize his family to start a new life in Brazil. Kiichi is eventually convicted of insanity and sentenced in an asylum; the film ends on a note of uncertainty as the narrator, Doctor Harada, looks on and wonders whether it is more insane to ignore the nuclear threat than to take it too seriously. Atomic anxiety, and discussion on how to normalize these fears on a society-wide level, are themes present in both 'I Live in Fear' and 'Dreams.' Like the latter, 'I Live in Fear' dwells on the precarious threat that earth's destruction will result from mankind's ignorance. But unlike the latter, Kurosawa deals in subtle and complex narrative in 'I Live in Fear': his strengths lie in silence, whereas 'Dreams', with its highly moralizing stance as narrated by the horned demon and the tormented businessmen in the vignettes, is marred by a "ponderous spirit which attempts to portray innocence but ends up only showing distortion" and a degeneration into the "half-baked mixture of dynamism and passivity, of heroism and caricature."¹⁰² Mick Broderick attributes this to Kurosawa's strength in scenes of relative silence and stillness; 'silence' is indeed regarded as a hibakusha response to the "literally indescribable events they have

¹⁰¹ Audie Block, "The Moralistic Cinema of Kurosawa," in Kurosawa: Perceptions on Life, An Anthology of Essays, ed. Kevin K. W. Chang (Honolulu: Honolulu Academy of Arts, 1991): 16 – 23.

¹⁰² Mick Broderick, Hibakusha Cinema, 12

experienced and, in part, a remembrance of the eerie stillness that befell both cities after the atomic pikadon (flash-boom).”¹⁰³ But ‘Dreams’ is anything but – instead, Kurosawa delivers a highly stylized and straightforward narrative, preferring to set things out on a dramatic stage with the occasional indulgence to tell rather than show.¹⁰⁴



A still from Kurosawa's 1955 film, *I Live in Fear*. Donald Richie calls this one of Kurosawa's more 'elegiac' films.¹⁰⁵

James Goodwin lays the argument that 'Dreams' may be regarded as an exploration of existential absurdism. He argues the philosophy as one approach to depicting hibakusha impact in which the characters in Kurosawa's films are aware that "any sense of security in everyday

¹⁰³ Broderick, *Hibakusha Cinema 4*

¹⁰⁴ Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 222

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

life is a tenuous fiction.”¹⁰⁶ Goodwin defends criticism of the didactic nature of the film, maintaining that Kurosawa’s empty rhetoric in ‘Dreams’ can be “understood as aspects of an absurdist predicament in the atomic age.”¹⁰⁷ ‘Dreams’ demonstrates this with its series of vignettes surrounding a character that cannot find any inherent purpose in life; ‘Mount Fuji in Red’ and ‘The Weeping Demon’ in particular, contain absurdist elements of having no traditional plot structure and oscillate between neither comedy nor nonsense. One example of the absurd is the nuclear smoke from the explosion, coloured differently so that humans could distinguish the various radioactive toxins in the clouds. The business man laments the point in doing that, moaning, “man’s stupidity is unbelievable. Radioactivity was invisible. And because of its danger, they coloured it. Death’s calling card.”¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the lack of purpose in colouring the radioactive clouds highlights a profound sense of irony that human cleverness has outreached itself, and unwittingly contributed to its own downfall. Last but not least characteristic of existential absurdism is a sense of ‘dreamlike horror’: ‘Dreams’ demonstrates this in the final shot of ‘The Weeping Demon’ when the Oni tells the protagonist he is hungry and is going to eat him; the camera cuts to the protagonist running down the mountain amidst silence. The young dreamer will eventually fall and stumble down the mountain, ending the seventh episode.

Ultimately, ‘Dreams’ is a cautionary tale of what happens when runaway capitalism and human’s ambitious disregard for nature occurs; Kurosawa’s post-nuclear landscape is peopled with demons who were once government officials and businessmen. Kurosawa’s take on nuclear holocausts is that it may also lead some to lose ‘their humanity’, which is displayed by survivors mutating into horned demons cursed to feed off one another on earth. The two vignettes

¹⁰⁶ Goodwin, James. “Akira Kurosawa and the Atomic Age.” *Hibakusha Cinema*, November 5, 2013, 180

¹⁰⁷ *Akira Kurosawa’s Dreams* on iTunes. Accessed April 17, 2019.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

complement his wider aim in laying stress that earth's future is endangered by humankind's carelessness and disregard for nature. The director's self-proselytizing is most evident in the vignette of the film, 'The Village of Waterwheels'. The setting is a fertile and watered plain where the children are polite and the adults are civil. The protagonist meets an old, wise man who tells the younger one that he is 104 years old. According to the elder, Man is destroying nature to make life more convenient; him and the people of his village had decided long ago to forsake the polluting influence of modern life technology and return to a happier, cleaner era of society. The central issues of the film are thus, the extreme means humans use to ruin the earth and inevitably themselves, grouped around the ever-present threat of nuclear war.

The Perennial Nuclear Threat as Reflected in Kurosawa's Films

1954, the year before Kurosawa created 'I Live in Fear,' was a sober year for Japan at the height of the Cold War. The nation watched as Russia, America, and Great Britain, continued to test nuclear explosions: On November 6th of 1952 the United States exploded its first H-bomb, a "ten mega-ton weapon more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima, on a Pacific Island near Japan. The Island evaporated. On the other side of Japan, the Soviet Union exploded its first H-bomb."¹⁰⁹ One of the most significant events in the history of nuclear energy was the Bikini Atoll testings in the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean; the United States conducted nuclear experiments there from 1946 – 1958. On March 1st 1954, the United States conducted a hydrogen bomb test there; a total of 290 people were affected, with 239 inhabitants of three atolls in the area, of whom 46 died during the period 1954 – 66; 28 American meteorological

¹⁰⁹ Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 4

observers on Longelap Island; and 23 crewman of the Japanese fishing vessel ‘Lucky Dragon No.5’, one of whom would later die from radiation injury.¹¹⁰

In Japan, opposition to the Bikini Atoll testings grew; peace movements (Gensuikin) movements declaring “No More Hiroshimas” “swept the entire nation” immediately after the Bikini incident, led by Japanese shufu (housewives) in Tokyo.¹¹¹ In 1981, the ‘Committee For The Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki’ concluded that citizen efforts to spread anti-nuclear messages of peace mobilized into popular mass movements after the casualties of the 1954 Bikini Hydrogen Bomb test.¹¹² For example, the World Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs was held on the 6th August bombing of the Hiroshima bombing in 1955; its demand for a ban on nuclear weapons was backed by the signatures of 32,000,000, “more than half the registered voters in Japan.”¹¹³ A mass rally was simultaneously held that day at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, drawing 30,000 participants and paving the way for new nationwide citizens’ movements.¹¹⁴

It was under this context that ‘I Live in Fear’ was made; against the backdrop of Japan’s growing antinuclear movement amidst increasing global nuclear proliferation, Kurosawa’s vision is understandable. Present in the film, and then decades later with ‘Dreams’, followed by ‘Rhapsody in August,’ is the director’s recurring fear that less mankind rectifies its technological and scientific ambitions, the threat of nuclear destruction will always linger. Viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida highlights this condition of fear as the persistent “problematic status of reality in the nuclear age and of reference to reality through language in such circumstances.”

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Hiroshima Traces, 192

¹¹² Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 575

¹¹³ Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 577

¹¹⁴ Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 578

He says:

One has to distinguish between this ‘reality’ of the nuclear age and the fiction of war... the reality of the nuclear age and the fable of nuclear war are perhaps distinct, but they are not two separate things. It is the war (in other words the fable) that triggers this fabulous war effort, this senseless capitalization of sophisticated weaponry, this speed race in search of speed, this crazy precipitation which, through techno-science, through all the techno-scientific inventiveness that it motivates, structure not only the army, diplomacy, politics, but the whole of the human society today, everything that is named by the old worlds culture, civilization.”¹¹⁵

In other words, social reality in the nuclear age is thus constructed on the basis of a possible yet still imagined event that could result from the accelerating real potential for global destruction. Kurosawa’s “Dreams” makes this concrete by the very nature of its format; atomic anxiety lingers beneath reality, these episodes of nuclear destruction take place while the director’s sleeping, is not awake. Yet the two vignettes also appear to stand as an inevitable part of the protagonist’s journey, since the film depicts his activities from childhood through adulthood.

In an interview with the author Gabriel Garcia Marquez in 1990, Kurosawa says: “The atomic bomb constituted the starting point of the Cold War and of the nuclear arms race, and it marked the beginning of the process of creation and utilization of nuclear energy. Happiness will never be possible given such origins.”¹¹⁶ One may argue that ‘Dreams’ is so intensely personal to Kurosawa that his shortcoming lay in effectively transmitting lessons he perceived from his dreams to the rest of the world. The film came after Kurosawa had announced that ‘Ran’, his previous film made in 1985, was to be his last statement: one must then wonder whether he considered ‘Dreams’ to be a statement, or whether it emerged as something more complex and not entirely formulated as one. Donald Richie notes that in the past, when Kurosawa does not

¹¹⁵ Goodwin, Akira Kurosawa and the Atomic Age, 180

¹¹⁶ “García Márquez / Kurosawa.” KINO OBSCURA. Accessed April 17, 2019.

think so well of a film, he starts at once on some new project. In the case of 'Dreams', the film was no sooner finished than did Kurosawa begin casting the next picture, having apparently written it during the filming of 'Dreams' itself. That next film would be 'Rhapsody in August,' which continues the perennials of nuclear destruction that 'Dreams' begins. 'Rhapsody' is set in Nagasaki and is centred on an elderly hibakusha woman caring for her four grandchildren over the summer; unlike 'Dreams', 'Rhapsody' is stripped of fantastical imagery and focuses on the ordinary life of a family attempting to heal.

Ultimately, Kurosawa's nuclear film canon may be uneven, but its own faults convincingly reflect the nuanced attitudes the director had regarding the atomic bomb; his search for some elusive morality is underscored by his differing approaches to the nuclear issue in 'Dreams', 'I Live in Fear' and 'Rhapsody in August.' In light of everything previously discussed, one can admire 'Dreams' simply for the director's attempt to create meaning and beauty out of the perennial threat of total annihilation. As Donald Richie says:

"Dreams leaves behind a residue of beauty. It is beautiful despite itself because the beauty lies in the attitude of the director. This is indicated not only in the didactic intent but in the slowness of everything, in the amount of respect intended, and in the enormous and brazen sincerity of the work. That a director in 1990 could be this steadfast, this serious this moral, and this hopeful, is beautiful in its own right. That 'Dreams' is most uneven film is evident. At the same time, there is nothing in it that the earlier pictures had not prepared us for. It is, in this sense, a summation."¹¹⁷

'Woman in the Mirror' and the Hibakusha fractured Identity

In 2002, the Japanese director Yoshishige Yoshida made 'Woman in the Mirror,' a bleak tale that explores the issue of continuing identity formation for hibakusha and their children. The

¹¹⁷ Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*, 222

story revolves around a mother, Ai Kawase, and her search for her daughter Miwa; born in Hiroshima in 1946, Miwa had left home after breaking a mirror and exclaiming, “Hiroshima and me – who am I really?”¹¹⁸ We are told that Miwa later resurfaces at a hospital to give birth to a daughter, Natsuki, only to disappear again. Twenty years later, Ai has located someone she believes to be her daughter, an amnesiac woman who remembers only one place and name: Hiroshima. The film takes on the form of a quest, as the three women journey back to Hiroshima in order to ‘find themselves’ but the endeavour ultimately fails: Miwa cannot remember who she once was, and disappears again, denying the possibility of closure for herself, Ai, or Natsuki.

According to Yoshida, he had created ‘Woman in the Mirror’ because of his ‘responsibility to address the issue’ of Hiroshima, more than 50 years later.¹¹⁹ The trauma looms into the present in numerous forms – while in Hiroshima, for instance - the granddaughter, Natsuki, uncovers a revelation about her late grandfather. Lost in thought, she whispers, “Hiroshima and I...who am I really?”, echoing her own lost mother’s words from many years before. Her words evoke both a sense of three generations coming full circle, and the dread that this threat of ancestral repetition will never be broken.

¹¹⁸ Hedges, Inez. *World Cinema and Cultural Memory*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

¹¹⁹ Richie, Donald. *The Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.



View of Hiroshima's coastline, as seen from the hospital where Ai's husband died. Throughout the film, Miwa is plagued by recurring dreams of a view of the sea, outlined by three small islands not unlike this view.¹²⁰

In the film, trauma is also recalled with shots of a crying child next to turbulent ocean, which Yoshida intersperses randomly throughout the story – it is later revealed that Ai's husband, Miwa's father, died early on from nuclear radiation, and a depressed Ai tried to drown both Miwa and herself in the sea soon after. The unexplained and anachronistic flashbacks of the roiling sea, which Miwa only hints at remembering, suggests that Miwa is haunted by these repressed memories, yet is unable to retrieve them. In another scene, Natsuki is sitting in the Hiroshima Peace Museum, watching museum workers wheel prints of Hiroshima across the shadowy floor. As she looks on, the museum workers bring forth the infamous image of the atomic cloud rising above the city; the camera here slows down into a freeze frame, putting emphasis on the photograph's symbolic weight. Yoshida follows the photograph with a blown-

¹²⁰ Yoshida, Yoshishige. *Women In the Mirror (Kagami No Onnatachi)*, 2002.

up image of a clock, frozen at the hour. The two images placed side by side are a levelled reminder to both Natsuki and the viewer that we cannot escape from Hiroshima's lingering and unresolved issues.

Like other films that deal with the atomic bomb, such as *Barefoot Gen* and *Akira*, light and shadows are used extensively in *The Woman in the Mirror*. The film is imbued in white light in an otherwise dimly light set: during much of the film, Ai is seen hiding in the shadows, her (white) umbrella shielding her from the rays of the sun. The omniscient presence of white light in the film can be seen in reference to the blinding glare of the bomb, which lingers in Ai's memories. Ai never discusses her aversion to the sun in the open, a silence that reveals her own trauma of having lived through Hiroshima: the final shot of the film is a fade to white, as she shields herself from the blinding sunlight – a warning against future Hiroshimas, a simultaneous erasure once more of any potential self-illumination, an ending on a note of anxiety and uncertainty about the past, present, and future. In this case, the comparison is most like the ending of 'Akira', which deploys white light to paradoxically suggest either the enlightening possibility to start a new world from a blank slate, or a grim refusal to confront the collective and individual spiritual crises that post-Japan struggles with. Furthermore, by having an amnesiac woman as the protagonist, Yoshida rightly presents what is 'essentially un-representable.'¹²¹ Miwa and her loss of memory stand for all that is unsayable and unimaginable about the experience of the bomb – as well as leaving the question of the proper way to address it open. As a second-generation hibakusha who is unable to retrieve her own memories, Miwa emulates the hibakusha struggle to come to terms with what has happened to them. Her eventual flight at the end signifies the need to escape rather than confront her reality; a trait common amongst

¹²¹ Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese film Inez Hedges

survivors; Lifton adds psychoanalytic lens to this argument by calling it a form of ‘nihilistic resignation’: “The experience is unknowable and makes no sense, I can best deal with its formlessness by remaining insensible to it; then I, and life in general, can carry on.”¹²² The refusal of stigmatized memory is another way to read ‘Woman in the Mirror,’ which aligns with how repression of memory was a symptom of some survivors due to a confluence of guilt, shame, and self-hatred. Ai for example, does not disclose what happened to Natsuki’s real grandfather until they travel back to Hiroshima and she breaks down in his old hospital room; Ai also avoids a TV reporter’s questions about his role in helping an irradiated American soldier at the time of the atomic bomb. More obviously as a case in point is Miwa’s amnesia, in this lens seen as ‘self-inflicted’, provoking a sharp sense of hatred the character harbors towards herself, and by extension her mother, father, and everything associated with Hiroshima.

The recurring image of the broken mirror that Miwa smashed before she disappeared 20 years ago, as well as the similarly destroyed one in Miwa’s apartment, both allude to the sense of fractured identity that the protagonist struggles with. Self-loathing and refusal to face herself are symptoms of Miwa’s suffering, she cannot bare to confront herself in the mirror any more than she can confront her memories. When gazing at herself in the cracked mirror, Miwa sees her disfigured face as an allegorical representation of the hibakusha as the outcast. Her reaction aligns with the idea that victims of the atomic bomb suffered from ‘A-bomb’ disease that marred not only the bodily surface, but the entire idea of the self.¹²³

¹²² Lifton, *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* 372

¹²³ Lifton, *Death in Life*, 181



Ai Kawase gazes at her reflection through the cracked mirror that her daughter Miwa had smashed many years before. The recurring images of cracked mirrors in the film highlight the characters' constant confrontation with the crisis of their fractured identity.¹²⁴

Such reaction to bodily disfigurement from the bomb was not uncommon, and Miwa's struggle recalls an experience of one thirteen-year-old survivor, who had been severely burned by the bomb. The survivor narrated her strong impulse to "break all things...that could reflect one's appearance" after seeing her badly disfigured face, and considered herself "dead".¹²⁵ She says:

"Rather than the joy of having survived, my regret over having become this way was much more profound...And however much I was encouraged by others, I could not help believing that for a woman to lose her beauty is equivalent to death. All I could do was live in a corner of my house. I didn't even like to ride a streetcar...I wanted to escape from the world...and if possible I wished to die..."¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Yoshida, Yoshishige. *Women In the Mirror (Kagami No Onnatachi)*, 2002.

¹²⁵ Lifton, *Death in Life*, 176

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Still prevailing social prejudices toward hibakusha are at least partly to blame for the refusal of many to disclose their identities as survivors, even to this day. Miwa symbolizes an outcast in every way; she has abandoned her family, abandoned her baby, and one of the tensions of the plot is her affair with an older man, who proclaims he is Miwa's 'guardian angel.' Thus, Miwa's invisible markings represent her as a survivor as an outcast. Self-loathing and detachment is at the heart of 'Woman in The Mirror', where Miwa cannot confront her own past – her actions represent her self-inflicted ostracism from society; she lives a marginalized life, existing rather than being.

Finally, desire and yearning in the politics of memory, is prominent in 'Woman in the Mirror.' The ending of the film captures this when Natsuki asks her grandmother, "did you really believe this woman was my mother? Or then, did you just want to believe it?" Lost in a trance, Ai responds, "this woman was a goddess. She suddenly appeared for us and suddenly disappeared." Ai's evasion of Natsuki's question exposes her longing for some sort of illumination – a resolution or piece of truth that allows her to move on from the past. In a story that revolved around Ai's aching quest to find her daughter, the film ends on a note of transcendence: Ai's answer reveals the extent to which Miwa had come to represent Truth for her - intangible, elusive, and just out of reach - an emblem of the nation's similar search in how to move past trauma.

Feminized Memory in 'Woman in the Mirror'

We have explored the transformation of Japan into a peace-loving democratic nation under the US Occupation; this change has been associated with a transition from a country of masculinised prowess to feminized innocence. Lisa Yoneyama calls this association as the 'feminization of

memory', where the disassociation and demilitarization of Japan was a gendered process. In this post-war public sphere, women actually gained a presence in areas they were previously excluded by: in the 1946 House of Representatives election, 39 female Diet members were elected. And in 1949, 794 women took local government offices, and 10 female candidates won their races in the 1947 House of Councillors election.¹²⁷ Women also took an active role in peace-related domains – post-war peace movements and antinuclear rallies provided theatrical sites at which feminine subjects enacted the link between the renewal of post-war nationhood and the concept of peace. This was particularly apparent post 1954 after the Bikini Atoll incident; the Hiroshima Prefecture Regional Women's Organizations, which had previously collaborated with the Democratic Women's Council to sponsor the Women's Peace Rally in August 1949, helped to organize the Hiroshima Citizens' Conference against Atomic and Hydrogen Bombs on May 15 1954.¹²⁸ The conference led to a campaign for a million signatures - which by the end of August, amounted to 1,013,472 names – “roughly half of the total population of Hiroshima Prefecture.”¹²⁹

Perhaps most crucial to the feminized memory were the tropes of motherhood and assumptions about the maternal that came to prevail in peace and antinuclear discourse, producing memories of innocence, victimhood, and perseverance with regard to pre-war and wartime women. The immediate political issues in which individual women were involved at the local level – labour disputes, demands for better working conditions, opposition to the construction of military bases and arsenals and to the port calls of vessels suspected of carrying nuclear weapons – these actions themselves can hardly be considered maternal. But on the level of national discourse, they were regarded as enacting natural maternal dispositions – “creating

¹²⁷ Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 219

¹²⁸ Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 576

¹²⁹ *Hiroshima and Nagasaki*, 576

and protecting lives, nurturing and caring for the weak.”¹³⁰ It created a dichotomy where females in Japan’s post-war peace campaigns did not speak – nor were they heard – as intellectuals, workers, teachers, authors, journalists, political leaders, or social activists; unlike many of the male political subjects who embraced this communal desire for a new start. Instead, they were limited to speaking as wives and mothers – in other words, as the everyday and de-ideologized constructs of patriarchal authority.

Yoneyama also examines how these victimized mothers are simultaneously celebrated and revered as the ones who survived the adversities of the war and the bomb. The mothers of Hiroshima were remembered as being “self-sacrificial, preserving women who aid their children’s recovery and who agonize over lost families”; Yoneyama argues that this trope of motherhood helped Japan’s national particularity of espousing universal humanism.¹³¹ But that is not the case in ‘Woman in the Mirror’, which depicts a hibakusha who tries to drown both her and her child, and whose child grows up to abandon her own daughter and leave her family. The significance of rejecting family, specifically rejecting maternal instincts, highlights a discord that Yoneyama claims was “sublimated” in Japan’s efforts to remember Hiroshima and celebrate post-war peace.¹³² Yoneyama cites Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan when she describes sublimation as a process which “dislocates desires, passions, and yearnings that have been renounced or avoided, if not totally repressed.”¹³³ In other words, individual accounts of mothers after the war, starkly differed from the dominant ideology and representation of the maternal in

¹³⁰ Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 194

¹³¹ Hiroshima Traces 196. A Japan Times article describes Japanese humanism as a sense of renewal: “a quality that has survived the period of fascism in this country, the disorientation of the immediate postwar period and the do-nothing cynicism of the present-day political elite. This is a genuine belief that there are good people wherever you go, and that the primary theme of our miserable species is not destruction but renewal.”

¹³² Yoneyama, *Hiroshima Traces*, 197

¹³³ Ibid.

post-war Japan. Sublimation of motherhood has created an ever-erasing narrative that continues to this day, Yoneyama says. One example of this insufficiency to link the realities with the ideology is the effects of radiation exposure that women witnessed: abnormalities associated with childbirth, including infertility, miscarriage, deformity, and new-borns developing leukaemia and other health disorders, were common amongst those who had experienced the bombing at a relatively young age. National treatment of Hiroshima mothers evoking 'motherly heroism' has erased anxieties about the biology and reproduction that need to be addressed. 'Woman in the Mirror' brings the focus back to the insidious and seemingly endless suffering on the most private levels: that between family members, between mothers and daughters. The portrait it paints is less than perfect: Miwa and Ai are no heroic mothers. Yoshida's film thus stands directly against Japan's history of 'nationalizing the maternal'; it offers insight into general of female survivors much more complex than the gender binaries, boundaries, and demarcations created in the post-war pursuit of peace.

Conclusion

Like any powerful text, Hiroshima must be read, absorbed, and recreated by each generation searching for its own truths. – Robert Lifton, 1987

To delve into a subject matter about an experience that has been universally agreed as irrevocable and ‘unspeakable,’ is no easy feat. Hiroshima and its powerful associations of holocausts and apocalypses, is only part of what makes grappling with it near impossible; its nuclear dimensions make it more technological, more detached, more a-personal than one can imagine. As discussed, the early postwar years and numerous social, political, and international factors clouded the atrocity of the atomic bomb and conflated it with symbols of political remonstrance for Japan’s apparent revisionist tendencies of their own history in the aftermath; it also spelled out the ways Hiroshima has been forgotten compared to the scholarship and discussion of its comparable Holocaust twin. By deconstructing each film through situational, psychoanalytic, and film criticism lenses, I have sought to dispel the forces that have conflated Hiroshima with numerous memories and focused squarely on the desires, both conscious and unconscious, of the artistic visions of those who sought to bring knowledge of Hiroshima to the surface. As we have seen through the aforementioned films, the discourse which arose from each film was a product of a continuing dialogue influenced by the contemporary time and space in which the films were created. The overall point I would like to make is that these films capture individual shards of a constantly evolving and dynamic understanding of the bomb, on a personal and national level. This perhaps, has remained the single constant element in the changing interpretations of the Hiroshima symbol; one that tracks progress and evolution towards an understanding that may one day enlighten humanity. Film as a medium, brings us closer to such

understandings, for art reasserts itself no less insistently than life. Ultimately, as Robert Lifton maintains,

“While artists in general have been overwhelmed by twentieth century violence, they continue to create in its shadow; and those critics who question this creative potential may themselves have been similarly overwhelmed to the extent that underestimating the survival capacity of art, even under the most extreme circumstances.”¹³⁵

¹³⁵ Lifton, *Death in Life*, 475

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