

# H-Net Reviews

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Mick Broderick, ed. *Hibakusha Cinema: Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film*. New York: Kegan Paul, 1996. x + 255 pp. \$93.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7103-0529-9.

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## An Elegiac Outlook

In contemplating the historical significance of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the contributors to this anthology draw upon various Japanese films addressing the plight of the affected persons, known as hibakusha. Any collection of essays that examines the a nation's psyche through popular culture risks presenting a homogeneous perspective that could result in a stereotypical conclusion. In this instance—while some authors share the same beliefs about the Japanese attitude concerning the atom bombing—most offer differing viewpoints that provide welcome complexity to the study.

Most observe that Japanese filmmakers have an elegiac outlook, or *mono no aware*, about the nuclear devastation. Several document how Japanese filmmakers ignore the horror and suffering resulting from the bomb and concentrate on the tenacity and endurance of its victims. One essay comes from Maya Morioka Todeschini who—in comparing the female hibakusha in the melodramas *The Diary of Yumechiyo* and *Black Rain*—examines the elegiac attitude within the context of Japanese culture and substantiates her conviction that quiet suffering and self-sacrifice predominate. However, two analyses of Akira Kurosawa's film, that are also enveloped around the elegiac outlook, are somewhat impotent. Neither writer can explain why Kurosawa is able to erase the feeling of *mono no aware* on his acclaimed 1955 film, *A Record of a Living Being* to a mournfully contemplative mood in his later films *Dreams* and *Rhapsody in August*.

Both Ben Crawford's and Freda Freiberg's Japanese animation studies, while in part analyzing *mono no*

aware, yield some disturbing, but fascinating findings. Crawford observes that the rigidly structured, burdensome social atmosphere, coupled with the nuclear weapons ban in Japan and an absence of guilt over military aggression, has sprouted a generation obsessed for romanticized images of robot-enhanced warfare.

Using Japan's animated films as evidence, he notes that this obsession has culminated in a yearning for the nationalistic self-sacrifice, military dogma that was prevalent during the Second World War. Freiberg probes Akira to expose the preoccupation with aggressiveness, underscoring the paradoxical nature of Japanese animated films. One teenage character—enraged at being victimized by an oppressive society—develops a sadistic tendency to dominate and destroy. Freiberg believes this is an allegorical reference to postwar Japan that, having experienced atomic destruction, strove to emerge as a hegemonic, technocratic power to “exorcize” the country's shame.

Probing the nature of Japanese monster films, Susan Sontag and Chon A. Noriega suggest that the country is “the new Switzerland,” a utopia pleading for world peace. However, Sontag's 1965 essay is a bit outdated because it regards hibakusha cinema as exotic entertainment that temporarily relieves the audience from the individualized terror of dehumanization and extinction. Noriega—writing from a Japanese perspective—traces the evolution of the Godzilla films from 1954 to 1985. Analyzing these titles from a political and historical viewpoint, he contends that the nuclear devastation acted as a positive

and moral force that motivated Japan to acquire a world-leading socioeconomic status.

Documentary films that surreptitiously recorded the effects of the atom bombings are discussed by Kyoko Hirano and Abe Mark Nornes. Hirano points an accusing finger at the American Occupation censorial practices and provides little insight into the Japanese filmmakers' artistic efforts. The result is an essay that is little more than a simplistic treatise pitting the U.S. against Japan. In contrast, Nornes spawns an interesting proposition when he states that Japanese directors—focusing on the victim's suffering—sentimentalize the nuclear issue and divert the audience from a true understanding of the atrocity. He concludes that a cold, scientific approach is essential in unveiling the terrifying violence of the bombings and cites *The Effect of The Atomic Bomb* on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, a documentary that chillingly assumes the point of view of the bomb.

Perhaps the most comprehensive work in the collection is by Donald Richie. His 1961 work not only explores the *mono no aware* attitude—the “new Switzerland” belief—and Japan's Communist Party involvement in filming the 1950's nuclear image, but advances an opinion that many Japanese resent their country's military aggression, a subject that at the time of Richie's essay had not been touched by Japanese movies. More essays of this nature, had they been included in this anthology, would provoke debate and thus expand the reader's comprehension of Hiroshima's cultural connotations.

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