HIBAKUSHA CINEMA

Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Nuclear Image in Japanese Film

Edited by

Mick Broderick

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for Sinéad
and her generation
moving out of the shadow

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Several people have been instrumental in assisting this anthology to materialize from a vague notion back in the mid-1980s through to its final published form.

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And, finally to Liz, for everything . . . *mon amour.*

Nostalgia and apocalyptic visions, even appeals to prior incarnations – these are the means by which today's Japanese barely maintain their tenuous psychological equilibrium [. . .] Japan as a nation is well on its way to losing, to eradicating, history.

Inuhiko Yomata, 1991

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

Robert Lifton, 1987

The only language adequate to Hiroshima may then be the unconscious as it speaks in texts.

Peter Schwenger, 1992

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Introduction

Mick Broderick

> The Japanese failure to come to terms with Hiroshima is one which is shared by everybody in the world today. No one has come to terms with the bomb – least of all, perhaps, the people upon whom it was originally inflicted. When the thing itself has become the very epitome of chaos unleashed, it would be expecting too much that an ordered and directed reply could be instantly presented.
>
> Donald Richie, 1961

When American film scholar and long-term resident of Japan, Donald Richie, wrote these words over thirty years ago, he was responding to the Japanese subgenre of cinema which had dealt with the atom bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Three decades on, the question lingers, does this appraisal remain valid? Have post-war generations come to terms with the bomb and what 'Hiroshima' means? Are there now, or have there ever been, 'adequate' and 'appropriate' cinematic responses to these issues?

Hibakusha Cinema is an attempt – perhaps momentarily – to reorient critical focus upon a rarely discussed, yet important feature of Japanese cinema.[1]

The essays collected here represent a mix of Japanese and western (pan-Pacific) scholarship harnessing multidisciplinary methodologies, ranging from close textual analysis, archival and historical argument, anthropological assessment, literary and film comparative analyses to psychological and ideological hermeneutics.

As Donald Richie reflected many years ago, 'the attitude to Hiroshima and Nagasaki has changed considerably in the [past] years.' Hence, the chronological nature of this anthology is aimed

at providing an historical approach to the *hibakusha* genre within its social context, i.e. rare and older commentary combined with new writing specially commissioned for this work.

But why a book on *hibakusha* cinema? Well, partly as a means of responding to the 50th anniversary of the atom bombings, respectively on 6 and 9 August 1995, and partly as a way of foregrounding often ignored popular culture responses to these catastrophic events which have informed much of the political, social, psychological and cultural milieu of the past five decades. This period is only now being recognised for the submerged eschatological anxieties and clandestine, anti-democratic activities performed by nation-states predicated as necessary in the atomic age.[2]

As Michael Perlman has remarked,

> We resist remembering Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only because of our tendencies to deny and avoid death, and also the nuclear reality; this resistance can also be imagined, not as *ours*, but as the resistance of *place itself* to the destruction of memories, of its distinct boundaries.[3]

Hiroshima and Nagasaki evoke powerful and sombre associations of holocaust and apocalypse, a microcosm of the twentieth century's staging ground for a global nuclear war which so far has remained, in Jacques Derrida's terms 'fabulously' textual.[4] In assessing the nuclear epoch we inhabit, psychologist Robert Lifton asks: 'is Hiroshima our text?' In many ways the following essays explore the *meta*textuality of Hiroshima and Nagasaki via film and television renderings of *hibakusha* experiences, as well as Japanese projections of future wars.

Contemporary geopolitical fears, for instance, of a nuclear armed North Korea test-firing ballistic missiles in range of Japan were touched on as early as 1960 in *The Final War (Dai sanji sekai taisen – yonju-ichi jikan no kyofu)*, when an accidental atomic explosion over South Korea leads to all out global war. Other concerns such as the stockpiling of plutonium by Japan, ostensibly for fast-breeder reactors but which could quickly be reused for weapons, and the ongoing proliferation of nuclear reactors around the country (currently over 40) have been addressed in dramas such as *Revenge of the Mermaid (Ningyo densetsu*, 1985) and *Dreams (Yume*, 1990).

The influence of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese cinema can be, not surprisingly, more allegorical than overt, as Keiko

I. McDonald indicates.[5] Repeated motifs of closure in *yakuza* (gangster) cinema contain images of the ruined atomic monument in Hiroshima, symbolizing the *yakuza*'s nihilistic world headed for oblivion, often juxtaposed with 'futile' and 'absurd' pre-war notions of imperialism and honour.[6] Similarly, the narrative fantasy afforded by science fiction has long enabled veiled references to the atomic catastrophe, such as in *Blood Type Blue* (1978) which depicts a minority of Japanese subjected to an alien craft's radiation emission that alters the colour of their blood and leads to a popular campaign of discrimination against them – a clear parable about the plight of the *hibakusha*.

Questions of authenticity, objectivity and ideology become increasingly problematic in the realm of artistically depicting state-sanctioned mass extermination and/or the legitimacy of survivor testimony (consider, for example, the recent controversies surrounding Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, 1994). Many *hibakusha*, for example, feel that they were the deliberate guinea pigs of US experimentation, in collusion with later Japanese Governments, and victims of a conspiracy of silence.[7] Such sentiments have an even stronger resonance since recently declassified US Energy Department records indicate a long history of non-consensual human experimentation with radioactive substances in the USA and elsewhere.[8] Certainly the presence of the principal medical establishment in Hiroshima after the war, the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission, with its policy of research without treatment, justify such hostile suspicions.

During occupation, while a concerted effort was mounted to censor and officially deny the hazards of radiation and any long-term manifestation, US scientists were collecting and collating evidence of just such effects at radiological institutes which refused to treat *hibakusha* but nevertheless studied them by the tens of thousands.[9] This seemingly blasé attitude is reflected by the American 'star' presence of Nick Adams playing a 'sympathetic' US nuclear researcher in *Frankenstein Conquers the World (Furankenshutain tai baragon*, 1965), a co-production between Toho studios and American International Pictures. After being thanked by a young female *hibakusha*, Adams confides to a Japanese colleague that the girl will be dead within a month, yet clearly the paternalistic staff will not inform her of this. Shortly after, inside his radiation laboratory, Adams reflects: 'Yeah, the story of Hiroshima is tragic, but it's given us the opportunity to

study the tissues of the human body. It's ironic but science progresses in this way.'

The very real exploitation *hibakusha* experience within Japanese society has traditionally made them suspicious of film and television treatments, which by necessity will dramatically alter accounts for purposes of plot, exposition and reaching the maximum potential audience desired. But it would be difficult to conceive of a more blatant pitch attempting to capitalize on the atomic attacks than this display advertisement from *Variety* a few years back:[10]

'My psychotherapy patient killed 130,000 people
(50 years ago in 1995) by dropping the A-bomb
over Hiroshima.'

Dr. G. Van Warrebey
Want To Do A Psychodrama?
FAX: 210–761–1375

Turning to the collection of essays assembled here, Donald Richie's fine but virtually unknown essay from 1961 ' "Mono no aware": Hiroshima in Film' was the first English language writing to assess the specific genre of film which deals with the atom bombings. Over 30 years on, this pioneering study still contains some of the most lucid commentary on Japanese cinematic approaches to their nuclear experience. While somewhat couched in the dichotomised rhetoric of cold war discourse, Richie convincingly argues that Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be viewed principally as 'symbols', not only for the Japanese but for the world, and as symbols their dynamic, evolving nature should be recognised.

Richie maintains, from the outset, the Western view considered the A-bombings an 'atrocity' whereas the Japanese saw them more as an act of god, and only later 'learned' to perceive and co-opt the bombings as terrible deeds from the guilt expressed by occupation forces. Yet this appropriation was transformed into something else; instead of horror and outrage, 'the Japanese substituted an elegiac regard which has remained the single constant element in the changing interpretations of the Hiroshima symbol.'

Cinematically, the initial response was not one of atrocity but that of 'tragedy', best understood by the near-Buddhistic lamentation *mono no aware*, 'what we feel today we forget tomorrow; this is perhaps not as it should be, but it is as it is'. The sentiment is evident in *The Bell of Nagasaki (Nagasaki no kane*, 1950), *I'll not Forget the Song of Nagasaki (Nagasaki no uta wa wasureji*, 1952) and *Children of the Atom Bomb (Hiroshima no ko*, 1952). After occupation ended, however, the 'new reading' of Hiroshima became politicised and 'the long expected resentment did appear' in polemical films such as *Hiroshima* (1953), frequently made by communists. As a result, Richie argues, the very *absence* of mainstream features on the subject is based on a

> disinclination of many filmmakers to deal with the theme because to do so involves committing themselves to the political left, at least in the eyes of their audiences. The Party has so frequently used the bomb as a political weapon that any sympathetic rendering of its victims has come to mean in Japan that the director or producer is probably Communist.

Curiously, unlike the overt and direct censorship during occupation, Richie also suggests an indirect censorship of many bomb films by Japanese Government officials, pressuring the large distribution companies to either not release films or relegate them to obscure suburban theatres while distorting their marketing campaigns to make them less appealing. Hence, virtually all bomb films made in the period up to 1961 are independent productions made outside the industry.

For Richie, the popular Godzilla and alien visitor films represent 'perhaps the most common reading of the Hiroshima symbol', although at a 'once-removed attitude'. Reflecting 'the new Switzerland' armed neutrality role which Japan adopted during the period, these films portray defeat of the invading monster 'not by warlike methods, but by technological knowhow', often with a Japanese scientist sacrificing himself to make the world safe and aliens working in concert with the Japanese to prevent the planet from destroying itself. Their metaphoric narratives manage to combine the 'never again' sentiment of the independent bomb features and *mono no aware*. Ironically, by avoiding moral commentary and merely wagging 'the warning finger', Richie attests their 'very refusal to make a responsible statement may be what makes this view so extremely popular.'

One reason why 'a responsible attitude toward Hiroshima is seldom seen on the screen' is the imperative to distort reality for dramatic effect. As an exception to this norm Richie cites Akira Kurosawa's *Record of a Living Being (Ikimono no kiroku,* 1955) and Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959). Although Richie finds the Kurosawa film a 'qualified' success, it is for him the best film on the subject (of the time), partly because it has a universality about nuclear fear not confined to Japan, which was uncommon at the time, and because it evaded the *mono no aware* sentiment.

Ironically, the cinema of Hiroshima and Nagasaki actually comprises very little direct artistic input from *hibakusha.* One major exception is *I'll not Forget the Song of Nagasaki (Nagasaki no uta wa wasureji,* 1952) directed by veteran Japanese filmmaker and *hibakusha,* Tasaka Tomotaka and forthrightly described by critic Sato Tadao as embarrassing 'rubbish'. Tasaka was hospitalized for several years after the Hiroshima A-bombing and was perhaps isolated from the resentment of the controversial occupation. The film is representative of the *rashamen* genre (a derogatory term for the mistress of a Westerner) in its depiction of a bitter woman *hibakusha,* blinded from the atomic blast who (initially) resists falling in love with a US serviceman. The American has come to Japan to return a piece of music manuscript he found on a battlefield. For Sato, the film quickly degenerates into 'shabby submissiveness to one's fate' and reveals the 'gullibility' of some Japanese.[11] The principal audience for Japanese films which concern the A-bombings are non-*hibakusha* Japanese, and as each year passes the number of living *hibakusha* diminishes. Soon there will be a generation of filmmakers/viewers who will not have direct access to survivor testimony. Future film accounts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki will forever be told by third parties without the validity and accountability of first hand experience.

Although primarily concerned with the aesthetics of science fiction, Susan Sontag's 1965 essay 'The Imagination of Disaster' is included here for its historic and insightful framing of Japanese films which refer to the atom bombings via metaphor and allusion. Contextualising the science fiction genre *per se* as primarily concerned with disaster, Sontag views Western – and particularly Japanese – SF films as exorcising the mass trauma associated with the use of nuclear weapons and their possible use in future conflicts. Godzilla, Rodan *et al.* and the alien invaders/emissaries all

serve to 'reflect world-wide anxieties, and serve to allay them'. For Sontag, 'they inculcate a strange apathy concerning the processes of radiation, contamination, and destruction' which she finds 'haunting and depressing'.

Twenty-two years on, Chon Noriega revisits Sontag via the writings of Noel Carrol and Robin Wood to address the cultural implications of Japan's most enduring screen presence – Godzilla – virtually ignored in every critical and historical commentary on Japanese film. Noriega's thesis is 'that this genre – Japan's most popular filmic export – has been neglected seems itself to indicate the mechanics of repression at work'. Indeed, the Godzilla films continue to draw top box-office, with *Godzilla vs Mothra* (1993) the most profitable domestic release in 1993 attaining fifth ranking in the overall top ten releases for that year.[12] Employing both a socio-historical and psychological methodology, the author points out that 'in Godzilla films, it is the United States that exists as Other – a fact that Hollywood and American Culture at large has masked'. For Noriega, the personalised Japanese nuclear monsters enable a projection of Japan in relation to both America, and later, the Soviet Union, which transfers onto Godzilla the role of Other that includes atomic war, occupation and thermonuclear tests.

Like Richie on Hiroshima, Noriega recognises the evolution of the monster symbol over the historical range of the genre, reflecting contemporary geopolitical and social concerns such as fears of global war, fallout from nuclear testing and international cooperation against mutual threats. Ultimately, the films provide a 'reinterpretation (or retextualisation) of the past that allows Japan to examine repressed anxieties within a historical context. The monster surfaces only when – as in the case of rapid postwar industrialization and the new cold war – the lessons of the past are overlooked in writing the future.'

If the Godzilla series of Japanese films have been critically marginalized, then serious study of the fecund Japanese animation addressing nuclear themes is equally rare. For Japanese culture critic Inuhiko Yomota cartoons and animation are 'a fabulously protean creative genre, encompassing an incredibly diverse range of material over the course of the 80s', frequently including imagery of ecological rebirth in a postnuclear wasteland. For Yomota twin themes dominate this product: 'nostalgia for the recent past [and] a futuristic projection of an earth of innocent, untainted

children left behind in the wake of a nuclear holocaust'.[13] Ben Crawford's essay included here compares Japanese and Western approaches to the theme and questions the apparent dichotomy which portrays American and Japanese animation (such as *The Simpsons, Doraemon* and *The Silent Service*) as self-reflexive and suspicious of nuclear technologies, while *manga* properties are often regarded as militaristic and violent fantasies. For Crawford, the Japanese equivalent of Generation X, the *shin jin rui* (new human beings), is characterised by an all pervasive mass media, nihilism, mutation and suicide.

Crawford argues that the emergence of 'robot-enhanced warfare' animation in Japan from the 1970s onwards replaced the overtly pacifist *anime* creations of the 1950s and 1960s (such as the benevolent atomic-powered *Astro Boy*) with an obsessive, 'romanticised image of war' and a nostalgia for World War II and the 'suicide-mission' (e.g. *Space Battleship Yamato*). Ultimately, the author challenges conventional cinema and cultural studies to face the complexities of analysing such cartoon properties by adopting/adapting a combination of entertainment and marketing strategies; to assess the disparate, cross-media properties frequently homogenised for the global market, and often initiated as comic strips but ending up 'mutated' as cinema features, animated television series, computer games and figurine mechandising.

Indeed, *anime* is so attractive to audiences that the Japanese nuclear industry turned to animation to create the TV advertising character *Plutonium Boy* to peddle their fast-breeder nuclear programme to the local population. Before authorities intervened and removed the ads from broadcast, they were used didactically to 'educate' audiences to the benefits of stockpiling plutonium in Japan and to dismiss as fantasy fears of nuclear contamination. As chirpy *Plutonium Boy* explains, marine life won't be contaminated by plutonium since the radioactive element is heavy and sinks to the seabed and, as he demonstrates, you can safely drink a glass of water full of plutonium and not suffer any harmful effects![14]

The ideological terrain of the cult *manga* film *Akira* (1989) is examined by Freda Freiberg in her essay '*Akira* and the Postnuclear Sublime'. Freiberg situates the film squarely within post-structuralist theory to present a reading of *Akira* as a postnuclear, postmodern fantasy of liberation and empowerment for Japanese

youth. Certainly lateshow cult screenings and video rentals of the postnuclear apocalyptic 'manga mania' and 'neo-Tokyo' films of the last few years (which have been quickly appropriated by cyberpunk subcultures in the West) attest to a cross-cultural appeal paralleling the Japanese export of atomic-monster films in the late 1950s and 1960s.[15]

For her close textual reading, Freiberg draws on pastiche and schizophrenia – the defining features of Fredric Jameson's post-modernism, Alan Wolfe's specific postapocalyptic analysis of Japanese 'survival', as well as Frances Ferguson's notion of the nuclear sublime. The social context of the (predominantly male) youth market attracted to *Akira* and fecund *manga* video is equally important, Freiberg stresses. Understandably attractive to a generation of children unfamiliar with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the narrative shuns 'traditional' Japanese family values (imagery of families is virtually non-existent and oppressive authority figures are obliterated by nuclear energy) but foregrounds an economic and technological nirvana powered by ubiquitous local and Western-style consumer fare.

Revising and expanding her landmark study of Japanese cinema under the Occupation, Kyoko Hirano describes the concerted campaign by US officials to re-educate the post-war Japanese population while prohibiting depiction of the occupation and 'anti-social' behaviour. Filmmakers were only permitted to show the bomb contextualized as a strategic instrument which was the only way to end the war. The visual effect of the bomb was to be avoided, as was any depiction of civilian victims. Indeed, anything in dramatic scenarios reminding Japanese audiences that they were under occupation was expunged.

Hirano cites the earliest documentary images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the official censorship and confiscation of footage shot by two Japanese crews in early August 1945. Ironically, one of the films was impounded by the Japanese army itself, fearing the devastating imagery would lessen the country's resolve to fight, although it was later surrendered to the occupation forces. A documentary film was released shortly after but with several changes dictated by US censors. Equally important, Hirano describes the abortive attempts by filmmakers to create projects centred on the atom bombings which were effectively gagged by censors. However, at the first opportunity once occupation ended, Shindo Kaneto (a former resident of Hiroshima though

non*hibakusha*) made *Children of the Atom Bomb* on location, and released it on August 6, 1952 to commemorate Hiroshima Memorial Day.

Most disturbing in Hirano's research are the countless examples of interventions by occupation censors, changing or halting projects due to their deemed politically incorrect contextualizing of the bombings and the official reasons for their use. These propaganda strictures were often not only contradictory, but denied the historical realities. Censors altered projects because they placed too much emphasis on the atom bombs as decisively ending the war but it is clear that Truman 'officially' used the weapons to secure his 'unconditional' surrender, justifying repeatedly that it stopped the war and saved millions of lives.[16] Similarly, censors frequently emphasised in Japanese film scenarios the military significance of the targets and eliminated reference to civilian casualties, yet there was the deliberate selection of cities kept clear of conventional bombing for this purpose, cities with relatively minor military infrastructure compared proportionally with the surrounding civilian population.[17] As historian Paul Boyer states,

> Truman's initial announcement downplayed the civilian casualties. Said the President: 'The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.' Though soon contradicted by compelling evidence, Truman's initial assurances helped shape crucial first impressions.[18]

Another issue was the manipulation of public opinion by censors to form an association of guilt so that Japanese militarism was perceived as responsible for the American decision to use atom bombs. Yet, as Gar Alperovitz and others have shown, the veritable rush to explode the atomic bombs in early August had more to do with strategically using the devices as diplomatic weapons before the Soviet Union had a chance to enter the war.[19]

Abé Mark Nornes's comprehensive 'archaeology' of the suppressed Nichiei documentary *The Effects of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagaski* details many of the issues touched on by Kyoko Hirano. In three distinct approaches, Nornes traces the documentary's full production history and reveals for the first time the extent of Japanese involvement; the manner in which

the print of the film has been controlled, 'hidden' and exploited by various 'owners' both in Japan and the US; and, via close reading of the original film and its genre context, argues for the fundamental *Japaneseness* of the film, and then explores the way imagery from the complete film has been appropriated and interpolated by fiction and non-fiction filmmakers around the world. For Nornes, much of the now common 'rhetoric' of nuclear imagery can be traced back to this primary source which, as he asserts, is 'the origin of Hibakusha Cinema'.

As a compelling history, Nornes's essay describes how defiant Japanese filmmakers risked (and were prepared for) prison by hiding an incomplete, silent rush-print of the film from both Japanese and Occupation authorities. Undoubtedly less well known but equally courageous, a US Army-Airforce photographer, also fearing the Nichiei negative would disappear forever after it was officially classified as secret, 'clandestinely' lodged a complete print at the USAF Central Film Repository. This film was ultimately the one deposited at the National Archives where it remains in public domain, available to posterity.

While few Japanese filmmakers have made even a single feature directly concerning *hibakusha* experiences or allied concerns, let alone *repeated* artistic efforts in this genre, one exception is Shindo Kaneto whose early feature *Children of Hiroshima* (1952) was for Richie '*mono no aware* par excellence and a very good reflection of a genuine Japanese attitude'.[20] In his history of Japanese cinema, Nöel Burch finds the film of 'grandiloquent lyricism'; the fragmented narrative and semi-documentary nature making it 'one of the most effective films of the period' anticipating Oshima and the Japanese new wave.[21] Shindo continued with *Lucky Dragon No. 5 (Daigo fukuryu*, 1958), a dramatised reenactment of the lethal radioactive contamination which befell a Japanese fishing trawler after a US hydrogen bomb test in the Pacific. The director revisited *hibakusha* concerns in *Lost Sex (Honno*, 1966) which concerns a young man who has become impotent from atomic radiation exposure at Nagasaki.[22]

Next to Shindo in returning to such themes is Akira Kurosawa. In her essay Linda Ehrlich analyses two recent Kurosawa films which directly concern nuclear issues, *Dreams* and *Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no kyoshikyoku*, 1991). Compared with the whole Kurosawa *oeuvre*, Ehrlich finds these films marred by a 'ponderous spirit' which attempts to portray innocence 'but ends

up only showing distortion'. Some of the director's earlier narrative strengths, such as the frequent construction of complex characters as 'reluctant teachers', have in these two later films 'degenerated into the half-baked mixture of dynamism and passivity, of heroism and caricature'.

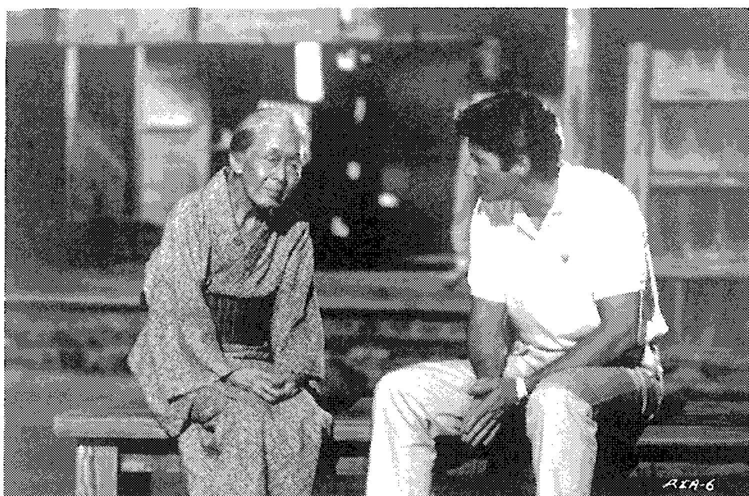
Perhaps ironically, since Kurosawa is regarded for his mastery of action and dialogue, the author finds greatest strength in scenes of relative silence and stillness, particularly evident in his rendering of the 'extremes of innocence' that are old age and childhood. Indeed, 'silence' is often a considered *hibakusha* response to the literally indescribable events they have experienced and, in part, a remembrance of the eerie stillness that befell both cities after the atomic *pikadon* (flash-boom).[23] Writing recently in *Letter Bomb, Nuclear Holocaust and the Exploding Word*, Peter Schwenger asks rhetorically:

> Has a language that is adequate to Hiroshima been found? Among the Japanese, where one would think the need is most urgent, the answer seems to be that it has not.[24]

For Schwenger, however, 'the unconscious as it speaks in texts' may be the language he seeks. Perhaps the poignant space/silence/ absence Kurosawa's *mise-en-scène* affords two elderly female *hibakusha* in *Rhapsody in August* most closely approximates this.

Ehrlich maintains that the elderly are problematically represented here: less as positive role models and more as grotesques and victims, while children become unsophisticated 'moralistic mouthpieces' or empty caricatures. In contrast, the author cites Mori Masaaki's anti-war animation *Barefoot Gen (Hadashi no Gen*, 1983) as a more satisfactory historical representation of the *hibakusha*, and to a lesser degree Imamura Shohei's *Black Rain (Kuroi ame*, 1989) for its use of humour and pathos, in effectively foregrounding the vicissitudes of everyday life before 'that incomprehensible event'.

Ultimately, unlike Kurosawa's earlier examination of nuclear themes in *Record of a Living Being (Ikimono no kiroku*, 1955), for Ehrlich these two later films are missed opportunities 'for a voice respected throughout the world to present images of the effects of war that are at once penetrating and extensive'.[25] Also, Ehrlich is critical of both *Dreams* and *Rhapsody in August*, and parenthetically of *Black Rain*, for avoiding 'the issues of Japanese responsibilities for its own wartime behaviour'. The selective



I.1 Symbolic post-atomic rapprochment. Kane (Murase Sachiko) sits with her American nephew Clark (Richard Gere) in Akira Kurosawa's *Rhapsody in August* (1991). (*Courtesy Kurosawa Productions.*)

omissions of World War II suffering and 'complexities of "innocence" ' in these texts lessen the impact of their representation of atomic bomb horrors. The critique has been echoed by critics such as Yomota Inuhiko who summarizes Japanese cinema in the 1990s as offering 'transformation and stagnation' with 'the age of the maestros' virtually over.[26] Symptomatic for him are both *Dreams* and *Rhapsody in August*, which were 'submitted to overseas film festivals like antique objects and were treated with respect, not as fresh, living films but as offerings to the altar.' Like Ehrlich's concern over selective amnesia, Yomota is more strident:

> the scene of Gere's apology [for the atom bombing] caused a lot of controversy. Many critics, myself included, thought Kurosawa chauvinistic in his portrayal of the Japanese as victims of the war, while ignoring the brutal actions of the Japanese and whitewashing them with cheap humanist sentiment.[27]

A far more sympathetic reading of identical texts comes from James Goodwin in his essay which contextualises the Kurosawa *oeuvre* as a product inseparable from the nuclear *episteme.*

Indeed, Goodwin finds signs of atomic age destruction in Kurosawa's 1950s *jidai-geki* (period dramas) *Rashomon* (1950) and *Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-ju*, 1957) both in terms of catastrophic *mise-en-scène* and the narrative framing of social holocaust which evoke 'a historical ground zero in Japan's feudal past'. Such a reading is similar to Schwenger's application of Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious*, and the return of repressed, latent (subtextual) meaning inscribed onto texts materially concerned (overtly) with other themes.[28]

In order to appreciate the prescient psychological verities of Kurosawa's *Record of a Living Being* Goodwin reconstructs the post-war socio-political context and nuclear issues of the times. He recounts how Kurosawa, working closely with long-time collaborator-composer Hayasaka Fumio (who was then terminally ill), tried to write a satire on the arms race, nuclear testing and the Hydrogen bomb but rejected the idea after failing to produce a treatment that worked.[29] While satire is not entirely foreign to Japanese nuclear cinema, it has generally been avoided. Two early examples are Kinoshita Keisuke's *Carmen's Pure Love (Karumen junjosu*, 1952) which features a woman whose son died in the atom bombing, and who subsequently blames it for every misfortune which comes her way, and Ichikawa Kon's *A Billionaire (Okuman choja*, 1954) which depicts a demented day labourer who manufactures an A-bomb in her spare time.[30] For Robert Lifton, the satirical approach 'is liberating because it punctures the image of absolute hibakusha virtue' however,

> It undoubtedly expresses resentment toward *hibakusha*, partly based on exaggerations and political manipulations of the A-bomb experience by some of them, partly upon guilt toward them and fear of their death taint.[31]

Kurosawa finally moved away from satire toward existential absurdism in his depiction of a businessman-patriarch whose preoccupation with potential nuclear omnicide leads to 'irrational' and 'insane' attempts to save his family. For Goodwin, the 'irreparable breach between the collective and the individual and, equally, between the political and the psychological is [. . .] key to its insights into contemporary experience.' The central protagonist, Nakajima, 'is acutely conscious that in the atomic era reality and potentiality have merged'. He revolts 'by virtue of the intensity of his conviction that any sense of security in everyday life is a