

## Remembering the War through Japanese Animation

As humans, we each have our own desires and wishes. Because of that, conflicts can be a common occurrence, but sometimes things can go a little too far. Such a thing happened in World War II when the bombs fell. Today, Japan has used the medium of animation to reflect on those times. Looking at three different works, we see what sort of themes and messages each has to offer.

Though barely 8 minutes long, the first piece we will talk about is *Pika-Don* or Atomic Bomb in English. Made with a small group, key members for direction and animation were Renzo Kinoshita and Sadao Miyamoto. The two of them got to know each other as they trained together at a small animation studio. After some time working on the animated series *Astro Boy*, however, Renzo would leave to form his own animation studio, Studio Lotus. The company would come to make simple commercials and, with the help of Sadao and even Renzo's wife, his studio was able to make the short film *Pika-Don* (Hotes, 2009).

Starting with a boy throwing a paper airplane, the short depicts everyday life in August 1945 in Japan. A wife is breastfeeding her baby, children are attending their schools, men eating together, and so on. After a scene of a child looking up at the clear, blue sky from his classroom, sightings of planes are confirmed so alarms ring out to get people to evacuate, but, of course, they don't get enough time. The next thing we see is the bombs fall and realistic renditions and actual photos of the effects the bombs had on the people and the structures around them. To even quote Sadao directly:

“You see, I was born in Hiroshima and experienced the bombing as a child and saw the mushroom cloud. I never talked about what I saw or experienced with Renzo, but what he

depicted in his film was so true to life: ...it was exactly like what I saw (Deneroff, 1996).

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The movie however ends on a happier note with a boy again throwing an airplane, but this time over the modern-day, rebuilt Hiroshima.

The use of more realism in its visuals is a nice and straightforward method of how good or bad something truly can be. Moreover, the lack of any dialogue and only simple music adds to that. Anyone without the knowledge of the Japanese language can understand this piece fully, and even though their form of dress and transportation may be different, everyone can relate to at least one of the scenes they show of people going about their day. All the relatability to the mundanities of life lulls the audience in only to horrify you a bit later as the bombs fell on that day. That is the sort of feeling I am sure all those people had too, but we get to see and feel a fraction of the true emotions they must have felt on that fateful day.

Upon scrolling through Youtube comments for the various uploads of the short, we can also see that it had been shown in museums and schools across Japan back in the day. While it makes sense that it would be shown in a museum, it begs the question of why it was in schools. Some of the comments even mentioned how they had nightmares after watching it.

Well, of course, we shouldn't show such violent things to children that are too young, but the truth is we need to learn about such events. In one article, it was found that most people from around the world were only taught more or less about the actual events. Whereas in, Japan, more specifically in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, children took special classes where they learn in great depth about concepts like how the bombs work, both physical and psychological effects on the victims, and even the reasoning behind why America dropped the atomic bombs (Wong, 2015).

Seeing as not all education systems tell the full story, this is why we use the arts to help share and express experiences.

The next film in the lineup is probably the more well-known one, *Graveyard of the Fireflies*. It was made by Studio Ghibli, popular for works such as *My Neighbor Totoro* and *Spirited Away*. The film's director, Isao Takahata, is the author of the written work on which the movie is based. The story is, actually too, a semi-autobiography of his life during and after World War II (Chen, 2016).

The movie starts with a boy named Seita saying he died on September 21, 1945. As he begins to recount his life, we get to go back and learn their story. Due to air raids from the United States, the two children lose their mother and hometown, with their father still out serving in the navy. They go to live with their aunt for some time, but soon, she begins to complain about the two of them. Not taking it anymore, Seita decides to take Setsuko and leave. The two move to a shelter alongside a lake. Things begin to get tougher so Seita resorts to stealing to help him care for his sister. His sister getting weaker, Seita goes to get the last of their money and learns that Japan surrendered and his dad is more than likely dead at the bottom of the ocean. Seita snaps and runs home to Setsuko. There, his sister ends up dying before his eyes. The film comes full circle with the two reuniting on a bench in a field of fireflies as they look out onto a rebuilt and thriving city in modern-day Japan.

Straightaway, we can see the same grounded and realistic tone that *Pika-Don* also had. Though, it is a bit more child friendly as the worst scene is probably the one in which we see the children's mother wrapped up in bandages after being burnt badly from the air raids. The simple angles used keeps everything grounded and reminds us that the characters and their struggles are

the things to be focusing on. Moreover, the music never really tries to get in the way and only ever swells at very emotional or critical points.

A good example of all this would be the cremation scene of his sister Setsuko. The burning scene isn't as grand as one might expect it to be. With no fancy angles, Seita puts his sister's body and some belongings into a woven casket, lights and tosses a match in, and watches stone-faced as it all burns before his eyes. Next, they hold a scene of him simply kneeling before the fire. The only thing that changes is the sky in the background. The most important thing about the whole scene would be the music as it conveys Seita's true emotions. It swells and softens at different points which helps us to understand all the pain and losses Seita has suffered up to this point.

The central theme of the story is the loss and hardship that can come from war. Right from the beginning, we are told that Seita dies, but, of course, it is not just those two. Due to warfare, Japan lost between 2.6 million to 3.1 million people, both in civilian and military numbers (The National WWII Museum, n.d.). Alongside this, the movie even mentions other effects briefly such as black rain which was a mixture of things from the explosion and radioactive materials. "This black rain exposed even persons far from the hypocenter to radiation injury ("Damage..", n.d.)". All of this is present and at the forefront of film and we can see how it weighs on everyone. Seita and Setsuko eventually die because they lose their home and parents, their aunt gets more and more stressed and lets it out on them, and even a farmer that helped the kids says he too himself needs food to survive.

Another small thing the movie highlights is in one scene near the end when the war had ended. After Seita has gotten materials for his sister's cremation, we get a shot of a possibly wealthy family pulling up to their home and saying how they have missed their home and

looking out to the lake, which happens to be the same one Seita and Setsuko were living at during the war. The irony is the scene is impeccable but serves to remind us of the reality of the situation. Not everyone suffered as much as the people like those kids, and they were possibly more than likely ignorant or blind to the suffering of those around them.

This conflict follows us to the end. After the burning, the camera tilts up from behind Seita to a nightscape of a thriving city and gives us a wide shot of what Japan will soon become. With a bittersweet feeling, the movie ends with millions and millions of people in the city going on about their lives as two, long-gone children watch on. With no English equivalent, this feeling is called “Mono no Aware”, and it is the awareness of the temporariness of us and the world around us. As Japan is quick to rebuild itself, people who suffer the same fate as Seita and Setsuko become like ghosts or fireflies and are forgotten for the new and grand things in the now for us. *Graveyard of the Fireflies* stands as a reminder to not just Japan but the world. Because of the War, this is what happened to our land, this is what we had to endure, and this is what no man should ever have to face again, Do not let these forgotten people be lost to the sands of time.

Last on the roster is *In This Corner of the World*. Released first in 2016, the well-known Studio MAPPA made the film with director Sunao Katabuchi at the helm. The film is based on a manga of the same name by Fumiyo Kono (Ehrlich, 2017). Later in 2019, an extended version called *In This Corner (and Other Corners) of the World* was made, but at this time, we will be focusing solely on the original work.

The movie follows a girl named Suzu as she grows up in society and deals with the effects of wartime. After seeing some of her childhood in Hiroshima, we follow Suzu as she marries a man named Shusaku and goes to live with him and his family in Kure, a navy port town near Hiroshima. We watch as Suzu struggles and grows from the hardships of both the war

and this new family she is now a part of. After the war ends, Suzu, despite having lost much personally, ultimately decides to be grateful and stand up stronger with her family as a new era begins for Japan.

Despite the more pastel coloring and children-book-inspired character designs, the movie still gives us a real look into the events of that era, just with a more optimistic perspective. Though the film focuses mostly on Suzu's struggles and relationships, the war still feels omnipresent. According to Yoshito Matsushige, a man who was closer to the scene and managed to snap some photos immediately right after the bomb went off, "During the war, air-raids took place practically every night. And after the war began, there were many food shortages (n.d)." Starting from the beginning, we see all this in the movie until the climax with it coming straight to their doorstep in the climax in the form of the fatal bombings. Moreover, even with some humorous scenes, the warm and emotional soundtrack helps to still express respect towards such topics as hardship and trauma.

Like the other works, we do see Suzu go through hardships, yet is shown in much more subtle and nuanced ways. For most of the movie, we see that Suzu neither loses a lot like Seita and Setsuko nor the people who got directly hit by the atomic bomb and is neither very rich nor a poor person. She, for the audience, is a glimpse into how the everyday man was affected by the war outside of Hiroshima. Her main issue is mostly just learning how to cook a good meal or fold clothes the way her new family wanted all while the war was raging on.

How the movie expounds on the theme of hardships is where this film shines. The film takes it one step further and shows how one should grow from it and move, by giving a realistic look into one's trauma and telling us the only way to proceed is forward. We have to look no further than the climax of the movie for our wonderful example.

For our setup, we go to where Suzu has witnessed her niece die from a delayed bomb. Unlike the other two works that showed anything explicit, the art style converts to crayon-like lines and black and white coloring, and, pairing that with the music, it still becomes more unsettling and helps to signify the emotions and trauma that formed in Suzu after the event. In the next scene, we watch on as Suzu's sister-in-law openly weeps and calls her a murderer. Also, it revealed that Suzu lost her right hand. The movie then continues to stack the emotions by cutting into her thoughts. We see the background muddy around her as she wonders how she realizes nothing is okay and haunted with regrets about her niece. After another air raid, Suzu finally snaps and tells Shusaku that she wants to return home to Hiroshima.

On the day she plans to leave, her sister-in-law is finally able to apologize. It is here we finally feel some sort of relief for Suzu, but it is interrupted shortly by a white flash that engulfs everything. Following a fierce gust of wind, Suzu decides to stay after all. Those two events were true to life as Yoshito Matsushige recounts, "I had finished breakfast... There was a flash from the indoor wires as if lightning had struck. I didn't hear any sound, how shall I say, the world around me turned bright white (n.d)."

At this point, you would think the horror would sink in when shortly after Suzu learns about the source of those events, but no, she instead puts on a strong face. Despite all that she's been through with her new family and the war, she finally shows resilience and true strength. This is the true message the movie wishes to share.

Feeling renewed, she firmly believes that Japan will never give up. However, a day or so later after the second bomb, the family hears over the radio that Japan decided to surrender, and for the first time, we see Suzu truly go into a fit. She angrily goes about her day and feels that all

this suffering has been for naught. Many other Japanese citizens must have felt like that too. Her mother-in-law, however, reminds her that tomorrow is still coming.

After visiting Hiroshima and being reunited with her husband after he got drafted, Suzu has come to terms with reality. Her hometown is a shell of its former self, and while her sister survived, she has some purple spots on her arms. Taken from actual cases, those spots appeared on many of the victims who were exposed to or near the bomb's hypocenter; many ended up dying shortly after the appearance of the spots ("Damage...", n.d). However, realizing she can't change the past, Suzu looks to the future, as she knows she can impact that. In the end, she resolves that Japan can start over, all the way in "This Corner of the World" they are in.

Though their tones may be more somber, this positive message is one that all the films wish to share. To quote his friend Sadao once more, "Renzo was quite involved with the independent filmmaking movement... However, I vividly remember when he and Sayoko-san were the motivating force to get the Hiroshima Festival off and running (Deneroff, 1996)." All sorts of feelings and ideas were welling up inside not only Renzo but everyone who contribute to these media to spread awareness of the effects of war and the atomic bombs.

From Yoshito Matsushige one last time, he says: "...we hope that... all future generations should not have to go through this tragedy. That is why I want young people to listen to our testimonies and to choose the right path, the path which leads to peace (n.d)." For the sake of the people of Hiroshima and those who are suffering right now in places like Ukraine and the Middle East, we need to keep teaching and sharing these truths with future generations. Never forgetting those fireflies, let us work hard to d make a brighter future in each of our "own corners of the world".



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