

### **Traumatic Identity in the Films about the Atomic Bomb**

Perhaps one should begin by asking how to present something that is unimaginable, how to understand something that cannot be rationally comprehended or expressed by means of simple ideas. One should consider the nature of trauma caused by the threat of war, genocide or holocaust. Such an ordeal makes man confront a challenge that goes far beyond human understanding - a tragedy that cannot be explained or rationalized. It is the state of shock, both physical and psychological that forces a man to seek some defense mechanisms which might help him/her to survive. The word "trauma" comes from the Greek τραύμα and denotes a physical wound; however, in its broader sense, it refers to a violent shock an individual may experience when faced with an external situation he/she cannot overcome and cope with.

Trauma stems from the lack of security or terror caused by particular events from the past that one cannot describe or express in any way that might bring peace. To reconcile with the past a casualty must take efforts to re-work their terrifying experiences. War experiences, surviving an extermination camp or a holocaust are particularly traumatic. Mentally paralyzed or numb, a survivor lives in ruins, haunted by the memory of their dead beloved. Succumbed to this feeling, an individual understands what happened, and yet, at the same time, is "incapable of imagining that something like this could ever have happened" (Slade 2004:170).

A traumatic experience leaves an individual crippled, deprived of self-confidence, unable to express his identity. An existence becomes nothing but dwelling in a past that cannot be reconciled (Dąbrowski 2001:82). Unpleasant experiences return, sometimes taking the shape of phantasmal delusions that one cannot get rid of or control. As Jean-François Lyotard once said, the word „survivor” itself denotes a person who should have died, but didn't, and is still alive. Robert Jay Lifton defined a "survivor" as someone "who faced death in its physical form, but stayed alive" (Lyotard 1991:56 & Lifton 1976:113-114).

In our culture, survivors are usually associated with the prisoners of concentration camps, witnesses of the holocaust, the systematic extermination of the Jews. However, we might as well refer to an example from a more distant culture, namely, the victims of the atomic bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. *Hibakusha* – the

ones who escaped death – stayed alive, but were marked by radiation sickness, infertility or post-traumatic neuroses.<sup>1</sup>

For the Japanese, the dropping of the bombs has become a collective traumatic experience; as it was something inconceivable; something that strongly affected the way they perceived both the past and the future. The trauma concerned both individuals and the nation. In the former case, it meant the deaths of one's relatives, the deterioration of a family and one's inability to cope with the loss; whereas in the latter, it meant a turning point which twisted and transformed the identity of the whole nation.

I shall not concentrate on the psychological and social consequences of the atomic holocaust. However, I would like to focus on how these consequences were grasped and "tamed" by film images which may recreate this particular moment and thus, endlessly re-produce and disseminate the trauma. One may wonder if a historical event of this kind could become a text at all. Is it possible to represent something that might as well serve as crucial evidence of representative inability? It seems that painful experiences cannot be grasped and represented by images. There is nothing like a traumatic image as such; an image merely has the potential to make us realize the tension between an objective and subjective representation of reality, between a historical fact and a memory which distorts it (Hirsch 2004:98).

It was difficult to record the tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on tape, not only because of its inexpressibility, but also because of the political situation of the defeated country which remained under American occupation. For more than six years after the war had ended the Americans strictly supervised and controlled film production in Japan. Although no official ban on the subject of Hiroshima or Nagasaki was issued, if a film referred to the bombs, the dropping had to be shown in a broader context, with clear justification of the act as a necessary step that helped the Allies end the war. However, it was strictly forbidden to show the extent of destruction or the sufferings of civilian inhabitants (Hirano 1992:59-65).

Even before the unconditional surrender of Japan was announced by Emperor Hirohito, on August 10, 1945, a day after the bomb had exploded over Nagasaki, the management of the Nippon Eigasha Film Studio

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<sup>1</sup> Nearly everybody within 500m of the epicenter was instantly killed, with over 50% of the casualties within the range of 2km. According to rough estimates, by the end of 1945, about 140,000 inhabitants of Hiroshima died of the wounds or radiation, many were considered missing. In the following years a large number of deaths resulted from radiation diseases or neurological disorders. What is more, amongst the children whose mothers were pregnant at the time of the blast, the doctors noticed a high percentage of physical anomalies, deformations and mental disorders. See (Holdstock & Barnaby 1995:3-4).

considered sending a film crew to the place. The shooting started a month later in Hiroshima; however, in late October, the occupational authorities confiscated the tape. Soon, the consent was restored, yet, in January 1946 the studio management was asked to hand in the whole footage, which was treated as classified and taken to the USA. Fragments of the footage were hidden by a lab worker who kept them safe in an attic until the end of the occupation (Nornes 1996:120-155). This is how the first documentary on the subject was made and given the English title *The Effects of The Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki*. The remaining footage could not be shown to the public, and the negative copies were kept for years in American archives.<sup>2</sup>

The version, which is now available, begins with a short introduction specifying the setting with a vast bird's-eye panorama of the city and a close-up of the epicenter of explosion. One can see the crew unpacking equipment and the scientists who accompanied the cameramen. The film may be described as *kagaku eiga* – an educational film – which is aimed at a direct and objective representation of reality. The detached eye of the camera tries to show the destruction, this perspective somehow reminds the viewer of a medical report on the sufferings of the inhabitants. With clinical precision the voiceover enumerates the number of casualties, while showing distorted, burnt and mutilated bodies. The second part, which concerns Nagasaki, introduces some elements of dramatization – for example, the story of a man in a garden who has lost his wife and daughter; frames which show the ruins of the cathedral, or children wandering aimlessly in the ruins. This is no longer an objective “scientific” report, but an attempt at grasping tremendous human suffering. The memory of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was shaped by these images recorded at the time by the Nippon Eigasha crew, later frequently used in news reels, educational films and feature films, even though the original footage remained locked up for years.

In 1948 the Shōchiku Studio was planning to make a feature film based on a novel by Earnest Hoberecht, but the script – like many other projects – was rejected by the censors. The aim of the American authorities was not only to conceal the side-effects of the weapons of mass destruction while the trials of nuclear missiles were being made and the armaments race was getting more and more severe, but also because it might have compromised

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<sup>2</sup> The US government handed over a 16-millimetre copy of the film to the Japanese Ministry of Education. The money collected nation-wide in the early 1980s enabled the repurchasing of 300,000 metres of the film tape which was then edited by Susumu Hani and released in 1982, though the official premiere of *The Effects of Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki* was held much later in 1994.

the image of America as a humanitarian and civilized country which loves peace, democracy and despises the cruel and barbarian methods of waging wars. The situation changed with the end of occupation in spring 1952, so a young Nagasaki-born director and scriptwriter Kaneto Shindō began the shooting of his *Children of Hiroshima (Genbaku no ko)* which was based on a collection of stories told to the university professor Arata Osada by primary school pupils. The script was not flawless, basically due to its sentimental tone with melodramatic elements in some situations, and yet, the film turned out to be valuable and extremely moving.

The main character is a young teacher, Takako Ichikawa (Nobuko Otowa), who after a few years comes back to Hiroshima to find the children of the kindergarten where she used to work until the end of the war. A once destroyed city has been rebuilt, yet, the people still live with the past, as they cannot forget how they lost their loved ones. The flashback sequences revoke the painful events – the explosion, the giant mushroom cloud and the city in flames; charred corpses, deformed and disfigured bodies of the survivors. Takako visits her friend, who survived, but is infertile; then she meets an old servant, severely burnt and blinded; finally, she finds her old pupils and returns to the places of great emotional value for her. Everybody she meets is suffering in silence; they cautiously hide their emotions, like the girl whose parents were killed in the blast and she herself is dying of radiation sickness, and yet, she seems to be calm and reconciled with her fate. One may see that in one way or another, all the characters express the awareness of the transitory nature of life. The multilayered and, at times, incoherent film by Shindō brought some consolation to the audiences, together with a clear anti-war message and a warning against the effects of the atomic bomb.

Apart from Shindō's film, two other productions deserve more attention, even though they do not directly evoke the events which ended the war. Nevertheless, they significantly contributed to the collective concept of a nuclear disaster. These films were *Godzilla (Gojira, 1954)* by Ishirō Honda and *I Live in Fear (Ikimono no kiroku, 1955)* by Akira Kurosawa. The former is an allegoric representation of traumatic events as a method of dealing with the inexpressible – conveyed by a story about monsters (*kaijū eiga*) which helps to understand the inexplicable or even to overcome fear. According to Walter Benjamin, allegory is connected with ruins, the remnants of the past; it is a gaze which stems from the inability to cope with loss. An allegoric representation always refers to the transitory and suggests hope for delivery.

Since the end of the Second World War, Bikini Atoll<sup>3</sup> had been the site of many American nuclear tests. On March 1st, 1954 “an unfortunate accident” took place – as a result of a hydrogen bomb explosion accompanied by unfavorable weather conditions, two islands were contaminated by radioactive fallout and the inhabitants were hastily evacuated. A Japanese fishing vessel „Daigo fukuryū maru” with 23 men on board was infected by the cloud of radioactive ash. Shortly after being exposed to the fallout their skin began to itch and they experienced nausea and vomiting. Soon they were diagnosed with radioactive sickness and some of them died. This tragedy was thoroughly discussed in the media all over the world and brought about a serious crisis in Japanese-American relationships (although the US government paid huge compensation to the victims’ families). An international debate on nuclear tests and their consequences began and, of course, artists wanted to express their opinions, too – in 1959 Kaneto Shindō made a film entitled *The Fifth Lucky Dragon (Daigo fukuryū maru)* based on these tragic events.

The opening scenes of *Godzilla* by Ishirō seemed to be directly linked to these events, too. A Japanese fishing boat is attacked at sea by a mysterious monster which at the same time attacks the people living on a tiny island nearby. In their statements, the survivors describe the monster as a huge dinosaur, which is later confirmed by research carried out by Professor Yamane (Takashi Shimura) and Doctor Ogata (Akira Takarada), who discover that a giant beast was awakened by the H-bomb tests. The monster begins his destructive raid through Tokyo and its districts - Shinbashi, Ginza and Shitomachi. The Houses of Parliament and the Television Tower are demolished while the monster walks towards Tokyo Bay. People run away in panic, hysterically seeking refuge. Hospitals are overrun with victims, many exposed to heavy doses of radiation. One of the survivors cries: “I have survived Nagasaki. Why?”. Ogata compares Godzilla to a “walking H-bomb”, the symbol of a nuclear disaster, as he kills people with its atomic breath. Yamane points out that the monster is the product of human technology.

Honda’s film perfectly reflected the fear of possible nuclear war and the trauma of the first days of August 1945. Inuhiko Yomota remarked that *Godzilla* was so terrifying because it embodied the souls of the victims killed by the Atomic Bomb. It remained a mental image of the casualties

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<sup>3</sup> The first atomic weapons tests began in July 1946. The hydrogen bomb tested by the Americans in 1954 had the power of 15 megatonnes (which was a load several hundred times more powerful than the one dropped on Hiroshima). In 1958, the American government suspended the programme in the face of protests from the international community.

treasured by the survivors, even though it took an abject and appalling form. Both the atomic bomb and the giant monster seem to go beyond human understanding and imagination as destructive forces of unprecedented power in the history of mankind. Honda's film therefore served as a warning against the fatal effects of nuclear weapons. The moral dilemmas of the scientists working on nuclear bombs were shown in the character of Serizawa (Akihiko Hirata). He constructed a new weapon of mass destruction, which could both kill the monster and humanity. Serizawa sacrifices his own life to destroy Godzilla and ensures that the weapon will never be used again.

*I Live in Fear* was one of the most interesting films made in the 1950s and deals with the subject of nuclear threat. Akira Kurosawa showed the psychological consequences of the atomic bomb and its negative influences on the personality of its survivors. The main character, Kiichi Nakajima (Toshirō Mifune), the owner of a big company, suffers from fear of a nuclear war. He wants to take his whole family, including his wife, his sons and his lovers - to Brazil which seems far enough away to be a safe refuge. His adult children claim he is insane and take him to court to verify if he is still capable of running a company. An external danger is enhanced by an internal threat, namely, the decline of family ties, while both political and psychological aspects are cleverly intermingled by the director.

The hero's neurotic (erratic) behaviour seems to confirm the opinion expressed by his kins. However, some doubts are raised by Dr Harada (Takashi Shimura). During the interrogation Nakajima tries to present his views in a rational way, explaining that his attitude is not the expression of fear of death or the atomic bomb. He says: "Everyone must die. But I don't want to be killed". He knows how to avoid the danger and wants to save his nearest and dearest from peril. Although the judge shares his anxiety, he declares him legally incapacitated. For the last time Nakajima tries to change his family's opinion – though it is all in vain; finally, in an act of despair, he sets his factory on fire hoping that when deprived of financial means, his sons will agree to leave for Brazil. Arrested and locked up in a mental institution, he loses his last chance for salvation.

Even though Kurosawa directly does not refer to Hiroshima or Nagasaki, his aim is clear – he wants to show how contemporary culture and society have become more and more "nuclear". Despite the real threat, everybody seems to ignore it and deny the very possibility of a nuclear disaster. Paradoxically, a justified fear becomes the evidence of madness, and seeking refuge confirms one's neurotic behavior in the situation where a denial of fear stands for normality.

Kurosawa returned to the subject of the atomic bomb in his late films *Dreams* (*Yume*, 1990), perhaps his most personal statement as it was based upon his own dreams and nightmares, and in *Rhapsody in August* (*Hachigatsu no kyōshikyoku*, 1991) – a film about the significance of the past for the young generations. Two of the eight episodes in *Dreams* evoke the motif of a nuclear catastrophe – in “Mount Fuji in Red” a meltdown at a nuclear power station, built at the bottom of the mountain, threatens the whole area – the inhabitants run away in panic. Soon the people disappear, the ground is covered with red ash, and there are just two characters left on the scene – a mother with a baby and one of the directors who feels responsible for the disaster. “The Weeping Demon” presents a post-apocalyptic vision of the world in which survivors turn into mad beasts howling with pain, surrounded by mutations of animals and plants.

On the other hand, the tone of *Rhapsody in August* seems to be completely different - the film becomes yet more proof that art cannot express trauma which goes beyond human understanding. Painful memories are not directly shown in flashback sequences, because, as Kurosawa claims, it is only silence that may communicate a tragic experience. In his conversation with Gabriel García Márquez, the director explains that „he tried to characterize the wounds the atomic bomb left in the hearts of the people and to show the process of their gradual healing” (Goodwin 1996:196).

The main protagonist, Kane (Sachiko Murase), is an elderly woman whose husband was killed in Nagasaki. She takes care of her four grandchildren who come to visit her during the summer holiday. It is their perspective that the viewer assumes to learn about the past events. First we hear about them when children visit the school – a symbolic epicenter – which serves both as a warning against the fatal consequences of the weapons of mass destruction and as a place commemorating those killed by the atomic bomb. “Under this city hides another Nagasaki, the one that was destroyed by the explosion”, says the eldest child. The second time the bomb is referred to is on the day of the anniversary when the survivors (*hibakusha*) gather around the monument of the bomb’s victims. “Today, for many people the bomb is just an event from the past”. As the years pass, everybody forgets about even the most terrible things. “We heard about the bomb, but we thought it was just a horrible story”. The mood of elegy and mourning, typical of *genbaku eiga*, prevails in these scenes. However, American reviewers criticized Kurosawa saying that by avoiding the political context and twisting the historical truth, he presents the Japanese as victims of the war, thus erasing their responsibility for what happened.

Kurosawa is primarily concerned with the issue of memory, as Hiroshima and Nagasaki are not only associated with trauma, but with the birth of a new national identity and the source of collective bonds. Kane remains cold and critical of her own memories until the final scenes of the movie, when the return to the past turns out to be too painful and the emotions burst over her apparent detachment. Kurosawa emphasizes the spiritual bond between the survivors and the youngest generation by suggesting the existence of a secret agreement, absent in the relations between Kane and her own children who are mainly concerned with the present and who want to forget the past. The survivors must testify to the truth and pass it on to the next generations. In this way Kurosawa suggests that the survivors of the trauma have a knowledge which is unattainable for others.

At nearly the same time Shōhei Imamura made his film *Black Rain* (*Kuroi ame*, 1989), based upon the famous novel by Masuji Ibuse (1898-1993), which belonged to the genre of *chinkon bungaku* - “mourning literature” whose aim was to commemorate the dead and tell the stories of their lives. It is not a story about the tragedy of August 6, but the story about the influence of those events on the lives of the inhabitants of Hiroshima and the relations between the past and the present. Shizuma Shigematsu (Kazuo Kitamura), one of the survivors, wants to find a husband for his niece Yasuko (Yoshiko Tanaka). Therefore, he tries to convince potential suitors that the girl is healthy and shows no signs of radiation sickness. Imamura touches the issue of double suffering – first a survivor is exposed to the bomb and radiation, and later as a *hibakusha* he or she must cope with discrimination and aversion from the rest of Japanese society.

Unlike in Kurosawa’s film, here the past events are presented in flashback sequences, introduced through a diary read by the uncle. The moment of explosion is shown from two points of view – one belongs to a young girl living in a distant village, the other – to her uncle, waiting for the train at Hiroshima station. Unaware of what happened, Yasuko immediately heads for the city. She sees a building burning in the distance, on her way she is covered with oily black rain. Imamura returns to this memorable day many times – when he shows the terrified victims, the children sneaking amongst the ruins, or the burnt and charred bodies frozen like uncanny sculptures. Scenes from the past and the present overlap. Some people cannot shed the shock, and compulsively return to past events, like a young soldier who in the effect of a mental breakdown during the war, still suffers from post-traumatic neurosis.

Realism and authenticity of the images is not only a matter of aesthetic decisions on the part of the director, but, first of all, of moral choices, as it



poses the question whether the past may be preserved in technologically reproductive images. Besides, it is achieved thanks to the tension between the objective and the subjective mode of presenting reality. The authenticity of the story being told seems to be a crucial factor for the main character, too, because he wants to make a precise copy of his niece's diary, however, as Carole Cavanaugh points out, personal experiences are deprived of their context, taken out of the historical course of events, and, at the same time, released of responsibility (Cavanaugh 2001:257-259). Imamura successfully realizes the thesis of the equal sufferings of innocent men and women, soldiers and civilians, adults and children, and makes us remember the war entirely through the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The slogan "we are all the victims of the bomb" conveys a particular ideological and political message, which was also clear in *Rhapsody in August*.

Like *The Children of Hiroshima*, and, to some extent, *Godzilla*, *Black Rain*, seems to be unique for yet another reason, namely, for the way it treats female characters. In *genbaku eiga* the image of women-survivors is not equivocal – on the one hand, they are victims who deserve compassion, and whose chastity and innocence have been preserved despite physical symptoms of disease. At the same time, their typical features, e.g. readiness for sacrifice, let them humbly bear an extremely harsh ordeal. A female protagonist of *Black Rain* is unique, not only because of her youth and beauty, but above all, because of moral and spiritual values thanks to which she accepts her fate with dignity. Yasuko does not fight, does not rebel, her suffering is idealized and anesthetized. The sickness does not change her soul, even though she becomes more mature, which is evident in her attitude towards a veteran of the war, with whom she seems to be bound by a special kind of affinity. The women in *The Children of Hiroshima*, *Rhapsody in August* and *Black Rain* seem to be the guardians of traditional values, the embodiment of the past and its memory; sometimes, they even become the symbol of reconciliation with the transience of all things in life. The influence of the past upon the present, one's inability to get over the loss and forget the traumatic events that shape an identity have been raised in the film regarded as the most important among those discussing the effects of the atomic bomb. This is, of course, *Hiroshima mon amour*, by Alain Resnais (1959). At first the French director planned to make a documentary about Hiroshima. Soon, however, he found out that the archival footage did not convey the whole truth about the events of August 1945. Nevertheless, he included it in the plot of the film, making use of the images of the destroyed city and the mutilated bodies.

The film tells the story of a young actress who comes to Hiroshima to shoot a film. Before leaving the city she meets a Japanese architect whose family was killed in the explosion. They spend a night together. However, it is not a romance that is the subject of the film, but the memories of the past, those traumatic experiences that cannot be shared with another person, as they are totally inexplicable and inexpressible. The opening sequence may serve as a superb example of filmic discourse on the limits of representation (Ropars-Wuillenier 1990:179-180). The horror of nuclear destruction is presented through the abstract close-ups of bodies that become unrecognizable. It is only through the voices – a female and a male one - that the images gain their referentiality. The images of naked bodies entwined in a loving embrace unexpectedly clash with the images of other bodies - deformed, mutilated, burnt or dead in the blast.

The epistemological aspects of the film are emphasized by the very first lines of the dialogue: “You saw nothing in Hiroshima, nothing”. “I saw everything, everything. I saw the hospital, for instance. That I know. The hospital is there in Hiroshima. How could I have avoided seeing it?” “You saw no hospital in Hiroshima. You saw nothing in Hiroshima.” It is not the matter of the empirical sensation, nor the truthfulness of one’s senses, but the ability of testifying to the truth of the past that becomes a crucial issue. The gaze erases the reality of an event. The man’s words undermine and question the woman’s statement, which suggests that such an inexpressible experience cannot be evoked in a straightforward manner. Seeing means forgetting a referential dimension of what has been seen – namely, the uniqueness of the tragedy. At the same time, seeing means delivery from what has been remembered, from the past and its madness.

The inexpressible tragedy of Hiroshima’s destruction is transferred and filtered through another story – the story of the forbidden love of a French girl for a German soldier – and such a story may be expressed with words. The process of transference of the plot’s events reminds the viewer of a psychoanalytical operation of working over a traumatic situation, so that a painful experience can gain shape enabling an individual to begin the work of mourning, by means of which one gradually lets his/her mind free of the past and gets over the loss. The woman tells the man that they are bound together by the fact that neither of them wants and can forget the past; they want to preserve it, but she gradually realizes that it will be impossible to save either the memory of her beloved, or the images she had seen in Hiroshima. Both protagonists may be characterized by the traumatic and dissociate kind of memory which is distinguished from normal memory by the lack of social or interpersonal aspects. The way the past is evoked no

longer follows the rules of a narrative logic, which guarantees the coherence of events, but becomes split and broken.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it was not Resnais' aim to compare those two traumatic events experienced by the characters. He was neither interested in drawing any analogy between them, nor in the ability to grasp one's experience by assuming the perspective of the other. It is rather a particular attitude towards the past that unites the characters – it is the embodiment of the strategy of a survivor, which is to survive at any cost: “Like you, I am also endowed with the memory. I know what forgetting is. Like you, I've desperately tried to fight against forgetting. Like you, I've forgotten. Like you, I wanted to preserve my inconsolable memory.”

The significance of both stories gradually becomes clear, as they both touch the issue of the limits of communication. The story of a tragic love for an enemy who is killed on the day before the liberation of Nevers, enables the woman to reinterpret these experiences, to find distance and reconciliation by the very act of telling and being listened to. However, a traumatic experience cannot be directly shown, it cannot be grasped by the logic of a language, as the only form of communication is either a scream or silence, both of which stem from a fear of death and from one's total isolation, alienation and the sense of otherness. Such were the experiences of the characters in *Hiroshima, mon amour*, but also of Kane in *Rhapsody in August* and of Yasuko in *Black Rain*.

Their trauma makes it impossible for them to function within society and gives rise to severe internal conflicts. Finally, it imprisons them in the nightmare of the past, forcing them to re-live the same events over and over again. Such a trauma poses a threat to the integrity of an individual, distorts one's sense of time and space, and at the same time, breaks the coherence of narration which is the source and basis of one's identity.

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<sup>4</sup> The distinction between normal and traumatic memory was introduced by Pierre Janet, a French psychologist.

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