Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 4: Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Japanese Experience

Viewing:
Hiroshima-Nagasaki: August 6, 1945, 1970, documentary, Barnouw

Barefoot Gen, anime, 1995, Mori

Black Rain, 1989, Imamura

Rhapsody in August, 1991, Kurosawa

Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima, 1987, Junkerman

Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped, 1995, Jennings, ABC News.

Suggested grades: 9-12 and college, 2-5 class periods, extended unit 2 weeks.

Central idea:
A number of excellent curriculum units such as Ending the War Against Japan: Science, Morality, and the Atomic Bomb (Bakker, Choices Education Project, Brown University) deal with historical issues behind the decision to use the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Few deal with the Japanese experience at ground zero. Richard Minear in his introduction to Hiroshima, Three Witnesses (1990, Princeton University Press) asks "Can we find the truth of Hiroshima in statistics?" I extend the question to can we find it in history texts? Minear answers his question, "We must look to the survivors for human truth of Hiroshima." His book presents and comments on the writings of three witnesses/survivors, Hara, Ota, and Toge.

With the fading reverberations of the 50th anniversary, the war and the re-examination of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have receded from journalistic attention and public memory into the classroom study of history. But will history teachers continue to study those events in any depth? Will they continue to find justification for going beyond the brief coverage in standard history texts? Will the lessons and legacies of Hiroshima continue to have meaning and relevance to a new age and new generation? The purpose of this film unit is to bring the actual experience of the atomic bombings, the Japanese experience and perspective to the classroom as the basis of historical re-examination.

Teaching:
This unit or selections from it can be used in conjunction with different related historical issues:

1. the decision to use the atomic bombs,

2. the question of whether or not the bombs were necessary to end the war;

3. the continuing impact of the atomic bombings on America (Hiroshima in America, Fifty Years of Denial, 1995, Lipton and Mitchell, Putnam), or

4. the postwar tendency of the Japanese to view the entire war period through the fallout of the atomic bombs, and to see themselves as victims, victims of fifteen years of war brought on by the mistaken policies of their own military and political leaders.

Whatever the curricular or historical context, these films are powerful, moving many students to emotional reactions which require some outlet of dialogue on related historical, political, and moral issues. The sequence of the listed films represents a possible order with the documentary Hiroshima-Nagasaki: August 6, 1945 establishing the historic and realistic foundation for the second film, the animated *Barefoot Gen*. *Black Rain* and *Rhapsody in August* are suggested for film clips. *Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima* offers an approach to the Japanese experience through art. The last, *Hiroshima: Why the Bomb was Dropped* presents the lingering concerns of Americans concerning the historic and moral legacies of the use of the atomic bombs on cities and civilians.

Hiroshima-Nagasaki: August 6, 1945. This 16 minute documentary was released in 1970. The original footage shot by Akira Iwasaki shortly after the end of the war resulted in a three hour documentary entitled The Effects of the Atomic Bombs Against Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The finished film was confiscated by the U.S., declared Top Secret, and withheld from the public until 1968. Barnouw's edited version with a soft, unemotional yet shocking narration has been used in classrooms since. Yet this visual record is limited to the damage to buildings and the city and the wounds to the survivors. It does not present the actual experience of the bomb, nor does it offer the historical context of the use of the bomb. I used it when it first came out as a visual supplement to Hersey's Hiroshima. Now I use a clip from the opening as a lead into the incredible experience of Barefoot Gen.

Barefoot Gen. My first concern in using this animated film was that the students would not take it seriously, that they would see it as just another violent anime. Thus, my use of Barnouw's documentary footage was to establish a realistic basis for the anime experience of Barefoot Gen. Brief clips from the bomb experience of the young boy Gen (minutes 28-34) show the initial impact of the bomb. Continuing scenes (minutes 34-46) show the reaction and the suffering of the people. The following days and the consequences on Gen's life and his surviving mother carry to the end of the 85-minute film.

I have used just the bomb experience (minutes 28-46), but while it portrays the shocking experience of the bomb, that segment alone did not allow the students to come to know and identify with the Nakazawa family. Also, denying the experience of the later section following the bomb, kept students from experiencing the character's final sense of survival and transcendence. Classroom and course limitations will determine how much of this film can be shown, but for many of my students this was and has remained an unforgettable film-history experience.

Black Rain. This brilliant, understated 1989 film deals with the continuing impact of the bomb on the lives of the people of Hiroshima. Focusing on one family, the story seems to be more about the difficulty of arranging a proper marriage for Yasuko, the young niece, than it is about the aftermath of the bomb. Yet it is about the bomb's continuing effects on the people. Yasuko, because she was exposed to the radiation upon entering the city after the explosion, is still tainted and unacceptable as a prospective wife. As the film story unfolds, it turns out that Yasuko is fatally stricken. Still, the story is about the terrible willingness of the survivors to accept their fate. As we identify with these people we come to realize that although they have survived the bomb, they can never escape its results.

Because the film is two hours long and moves at times slowly in its almost anthropological study of this family and their lives, it is probably not for young students expecting the horrors of the bombing. For that, clips from the first 12 minutes of the film or from minutes 33-42 will provide realistic images of the experience of the devastation of the city and the suffering of the people.

Rhapsody in August. Although some critics find this a flawed film, not up to the quality of Kurosawa's greatest films, I have found it a valuable source for clips dealing with the impact of the atomic bomb on later generations.

During a summer vacation, four pre-teen to teenage children are staying with their grandmother outside of Nagasaki while their parents are visiting wealthy Japanese-American relatives in Hawaii. When they too are invited with the grandmother to fly to Hawaii, the grandmother's long-sleeping, bitter memory of the loss of her husband in the atomic bomb is awakened and she refuses to go. It is only at this time that the children learn of her experience and their legacy of the bomb. In one scene the children visit Nagasaki's Peace Park, an excellent visual coverage of the monuments. Although the children seem moved by the experience, the presence of tourist groups casually parading by the monuments suggests that the post-bomb generations have lost the deeper meaning of the legacy.

Later, in a many layered scene, Richard Gere, a cousin from the wealthy Japanese-American family, has arrived from Hawaii to visit with the grandmother. Just recently learning of the grandfather's death in the bomb, he has come to pay his respects and to apologize to the grandmother. He asks first to visit the school yard where the grandfather died. There with the parents he meets the children and as they approach the monument to the dead teachers and students, they are joined by a procession of older people, the survivors of that day at the school. They have come to wash and decorate the monument. With other school children playing joyfully in another part of the school yard, the survivors tending to the monument to their dead classmates, and the mournful music of a solitary singer accompanied by an organ, the youngest child says "These people...they scare me." The older boy answers him, "Because these people witnessed something terrifying." The American then says, "Seeing these people...Nagasaki... that day...I can feel it." That the American has come to apologize for his father and his family for not knowing of the grandfather's death, troubles some American critics. They feel Kurosawa is broaching the sensitive issue of an American apology for dropping the bomb. But this apology can be read as personal rather than political.

The scene occurring 68-75 minutes in the film plus another during a memorial service, 81-84 minutes in the film can be used to explore the issue of the bomb's legacy for the different generations. Although Kurosawa is, at times, overly didactic with his themes, the best scenes are rich in unexplained, provocative symbolism useful in class discussion.

Hellfire: A Journey from Hiroshima. This 58-minute documentary examines the art and lives of artists Iri and Toshi Maruki. Their murals graphically depict the suffering of the victims in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Their work, beginning in 1953 grew to encompass Japan's atrocities in Nanking and the emaciated dead of Auschwitz, the theme always man's inhumanity to man.

The art is impressionistic, like anguished shadows encountered in the descent into Dante's Inferno. Clips from this film combined with copies of some of the available child-like drawings of the nightmare experiences of the bomb survivors can launch a classroom discussion of the role and paradox of art recording the grotesque side of human history.

Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped. Although the focus of this unit is on the Japanese experience of the atomic bombs, I have included one 1995 news special

exploring the continuing conflict in the American historical narrative of the dropping of the bomb. Peter Jennings of ABC News drawing on interviews with such scholars as Gar Alperovitz, Martin Sherwin, John Dower, and Barton Bernstein questions the postwar narrative justifying the use of the bombs. This program was in sharp contrast with CBS's 1995 *Victory in the Pacific* in which Dan Rather and General Schwarzkop reinforced the official narrative that the use of the bomb did shorten the war and save both American and Japanese lives. Jennings questions, "Why was it dropped? Did it shorten the war? Did it save American lives? Was it necessary? Were there alternatives? Did the United States need to be the first and only nation to use an atomic bomb?" challenge that narrative. The use of the 7-minute opening alone can reveal the continuing historical conflict of interpretation.

For both Japan and the United States, how each views the Pacific War is related its national identity:how it views itself and how it is viewed by other nations, how it conducts itself internationally. Jennings concludes the program with "The controversy about using the bomb is not going to be put to rest in this anniversary year. For one thing, it is hard for people who didn't live through the war to understand how much it meant to the men who believed their lives were spared because it was dropped. At the same time, it is clear there are people who don't want to contemplate the moral questions that are also part of the bomb's legacy."

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