

century expressed in Miyazaki Hayao's blockbuster hit *Princess Mononoke*. None of these is necessarily historically accurate. Instead, in their own way, they present "history as vision"—visions that are both selective and even ideological but that still contain universal images of great power and resonance.

CHAPTER NINE

NO MORE WORDS:  
BAREFOOT GEN,  
GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES,  
AND "VICTIM'S HISTORY"

"Oh look there's an enemy plane coming." . . . Thereafter there were no more words.

—Hiroshima survivor Kijima Katsumi,  
quoted in John Treat, *Writing Ground Zero*

THE TWO MOST FAMOUS ANIME DRAMAS concerning World War II, Mori Masaki's *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no gen*, 1983) and Takahata Isao's *Grave of the Fireflies* (*Hotaru no haka*, 1988), share in the collectivity of the Japanese memory as well as individual autobiographical accounts of personal suffering. In this regard, they attempt to "speak

for history" in a personal voice that, through the power of vivid images of suffering, destruction, and renewal, becomes a collective voice of the Japanese people. They are both essentially family dramas seen through the eyes of children, and, although there are scenes of horrifying violence and devastation (especially in *Barefoot Gen*), the films contain many powerful scenes of human-scale interaction that are subdued and imbued with a childlike, innocent tone.

The reasons behind this subdued treatment of the war are complex but quite understandable and common to other media depictions as well. As many scholars have pointed out, the Japanese version of World War II may generally be described as a "victim's history,"<sup>1</sup> in which the Japanese people were seen as helpless victims of a corrupt and evil conspiracy between their government and military. This "victim's history" is partly due to the collaborative American-Japanese efforts under the Occupation to create an image of a postwar democratic Japan that would free the Japanese from an inescapable fascist and militarist past. By shifting the burden of responsibility for a devastating war onto the military and the government, it was felt that the slate could be wiped clean and Japan could undertake the task of rebuilding, liberated from the dark shadows of war guilt and recrimination. Consequently, both official and cultural versions of the war have played down citizens' involvement with the actual machinery of combat and aggression to the point that they ignore or elide Japan's aggression against China, which began in 1931.<sup>2</sup> Instead, official vehicles, such as textbooks and government ceremonies as well as popular and elite culture, emphasize the period from Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima, which, in Carol Gluck's neat phrase, "set a balanced moral calculus" essentially allowing the atomic bombing to cancel out responsibility for Pearl Harbor and simply glossing over the colonization of Korea and the previous ten years of aggression against China.

Cultural works allied with this victim's history are numerous. They include writings by atomic bomb survivors and live-action antiwar films such as *Harp of Burma* or *Fires on the Plain*, all of which share strong anti-war sentiment but show little inclination to delve into issues of guilt or responsibility. These traits are shared by *Grave of the Fireflies* and *Barefoot Gen*. Centered on the 1940s, the two films fit into victims' history in certain obvious ways. First, the films evoke

an unproblematic response of heartfelt sympathy on the part of the viewers by focusing on innocent children devastated by war's destruction. As two anime critics sum up the film's impact: "It is frankly impossible to watch this production [*Grave of the Fireflies*] without being drained emotionally."<sup>3</sup> The use of generally realist conventions (*Grave of the Fireflies* in particular has an organic, naturalistic look, and both films work effectively to create a wartime period feel in their depictions of architecture and traditional dress) and a straightforward narrative structure also help the viewer identify with the heartwrenching stories on screen.

Within the category of victim's history, however, the two employ very different dynamics. In *Grave of the Fireflies* both text and subtext embody an endless nightmarish vision of passivity and despair, while *Barefoot Gen* has at its core an indomitable spirit of resistance and renewal, despite the scenes of almost unimaginable horror that it depicts.

*Grave of the Fireflies* has a pervasive tone of powerlessness from the very beginning of the film. The first scene shows an emaciated and disheveled young boy slumped against a pillar in a vast train station while a voice-over intones, "September 21, 1945 was the night I died." As other passersby look on with a mixture of contempt and horror, he slumps further and ends up lying on the ground. A maintenance man takes his pulse and pronounces, "he's a goner." Another man looks through his possessions and finds a small candy tin. Throwing it away, it clatters on the ground and opens up to disgorge a few small white objects. Later on the viewer discovers that these are the cremated bones of the boy's sister.

The opening scene—its action composed of a series of downward movements—sets the despairing tone of the film. The boy's posture of helplessness only intensifies as he goes from slumping to prone. No one extends any aid to him, and instead the passersby move away from his dying figure while maintenance men crouch to paw his possessions. In a further downward movement they throw to the floor the box, which opens to show only symbols of death that also scatter in a downward arc.

The narrative structure of the film follows a similar downward trajectory. Based on an autobiographical story by the novelist Nosaka Akiyuki, most of the action takes place in the coastal city of Kobe

toward the end of the war when Allied aerial bombing began to intensify, leading to enormous numbers of civilian casualties. A boy, Seita, and his sister, Setsuko, lose their mother (their father is a commander in the Navy) and are forced to live with an unsympathetic aunt whose coldness and hectoring at the boy's unwillingness to work eventually drive them to make a home of their own in an abandoned bomb shelter. Their time in the bomb shelter allows for a few poignant scenes of childish happiness, especially for Setsuko, who loves the fireflies that her big brother catches for her. But she is sad that the fireflies die so quickly and ends up making a "grave" for the firefly corpses that litter their shelter. In the end the two children are unable to survive on their own. Setsuko dies from malnutrition, and the final scene shows Seita collecting her ashes.

The film contains moments of beauty and even happiness, especially in its signature image of the fireflies illuminating the faces of the two children laughing together in the darkness of the bomb shelter. However, the image that most dominates *Grave of the Fireflies* is that of the bomber planes that appear throughout the film at consistently recurring intervals. The action of the narrative actually begins with planes fire-bombing the street where the children live and turning it into flames while, later in the film, a joyous day at the seaside ends with planes sweeping above the beach and the children running for shelter. Another aerial image occurs in one of the film's quietest and most effective moments. Returning to the shelter to help his sister (whom he will find dying), Seita sees a single spectral plane fly silently overhead and vanish into the distance, the true sign that the war is finally over.

The recurring image of planes flying above the heads of children evokes a world that can never be safe—a world where ultimate horror rains down from the innocent sky. Rather than using language, the film uses simple repeated visuals to capture this overwhelming sense of vulnerability. These visuals include the horizontal movement of planes sweeping across the sky, an image that is initially counterbalanced by the small, defiant verticals of the children. The balance shifts when the bombs (or bullets) begin to rain down, and the screen is enveloped in an overwhelming downward movement, symbolically evoking the hopelessness of the children's situation.

In many ways the almost static narrative of *Grave of the Fireflies* evokes Harootunian's description of postwar Japan as existing in an

"endless present, more spatial than temporal," while its autobiographical memoir style privileges what he describes as "the authority of the inner."<sup>4</sup> There is no discussion of the causes of the war (and consequently no broader explanation for the children's suffering), and no sense of hope or of a new turning point at the war's end. Instead there is a dreamlike, strongly elegiac quality to *Fireflies* that suggests a history that can never be escaped or transcended but that must be continually experienced as harrowing, painful, and relentlessly oppressive. Dialogue is minimal, underlining the point that words are useless; only the searing parade of images of destruction from the sky (Harootunian's "spatial present") has any final meaning, and it is one that shuts out the possibility for action.

In contrast, *Barefoot Gen* is obsessed with action and with the temporal, particularly with two temporal moments, the period of time leading up to the bombing of Hiroshima and the period immediately following it. This is not surprising given the nature of the events that the film describes. The awareness of time (signified by the pages of a calendar and at one point by the hands of a clock) imbues the scenes before the bombing with a taught suspense. What is surprising, however, is that the overall tone of this film, while still surrounded by an aura of suffering, is very far from the mood of passivity and powerlessness that pervades *Grave of the Fireflies*. Although the film in certain ways fits into the "victims' history" model, it is actually a far more complex version than *Grave of the Fireflies* and in many aspects is a more powerful antiwar film with a strongly activist subtext.

This activism is due to the nature of the event that *Barefoot Gen* attempts to represent, the world's first atomic bombing. Unlike *Grave of the Fireflies*, the temporal continuum of which is an endless present punctuated by scenes of bombardment that numb the characters into miserable passivity, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is a single event that changed the world. This is not to minimize the suffering depicted in Takahata's film, but it is important to recognize just how unique and overwhelming the atomic bomb was. In Japan the initial reaction to the bomb was largely one of silence, guilt, and even repression on the part of the survivors (and on the part of the horrified nation as well). Even while official censorship was in place, however, popular culture dealt with the bomb, although in the displaced form of horrific monsters from outer space or from the lower depths, immortalized in