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**Japanese Animation in a Post Atom Bomb World**

The media produced and consumed by a society represents a direct reflection of the cultural history experienced up to that point in time. Every so often, an event will occur that becomes such a distinct turning point, the effect it has on culture is inescapable. The most striking instance of this phenomena has to be the ways in which World War 2, particularly the use of the atomic bomb, changed the face of Japanese culture altogether. Japanese animation, or anime, made great strides in the decades following WW2. It quickly became a creative means to digest the existential pain and suffering Japan had experienced as a culture. By appropriating wartime concepts and imagery, they could explain their feelings towards the physical world, through the lense of two dimensional fiction. Here I will look at stills from three anime, and analyze how they were influenced in this way. I will use Barthes semiotic method to draw context, as well as compare them to real WW2 imagery.

The first image comes from Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Akira*. In this image we see a wide and vast landscape dotted with buildings and surrounded by mountains. It appears to be a rather sprawling urban area. Our attention is immediately drawn to a large dome shaped explosion of light emanating from the center of the city. The light is blindingly bright, and is surrounded by dust and debris. When we take these context-less observations and think about them within the framework of the Japanese culture, we are thinking connotatively. This massive explosion is a direct reference to the atomic bomb, as well as the extinction-level destruction caused by the war in general. The extraordinary energy and power released from a nuclear blast is shown by the blinding ball of light. This explosion is placed in the middle of a large landscape, with the frame pulled out, to show us just how extensive this destruction was. We are viewing this event from the perspective of an omnipotent observer; a spectator bearing witness to the atrocity. We imagine the mass casualties as a result, given the buildings surrounding the explosion. Looking to this real image of a nuclear blast, we see many similarities. The framing of the shot, pulled out so far as to see the sheer size of the impact across the landscape. The dust rising from the ground, as well as all of the small structures on the surface, evoke a similar environment.

Next we look at a frame from Isao Takahata’s *Grave of the Fireflies*. First examinations show us two people, who look to be common towns people. One is a small child being carried. The sky is brown and filled with black smoke, while the ground is covered in rubble and utterly destroyed buildings. We see a patch of green grass in the foreground. Looking again, this time for meaning, the destruction looks to be of a rural village. The remains of telephone poles and pitched roofs emerge from the otherwise indistinguishable rubble, providing clues to their previous form. This tells us of the displacement and loss of homes experienced by the townspeople. Speaking of, the two standing in the foreground appear to be innocent bystanders. The clothing of the older boy matches that of a typical rural Japanese citizen of that time. The way in which he carries the small child leads us to believe he is some sort of parental figure or guardian. Their difference in age, particularly how young the child being carried is, shows us how indiscriminate war is. No one is safe from its suffering, be it an elderly woman, or an infant child. The state of the buildings, and the smoke filling the air, let us know this village was firebombed, as opposed to being wiped out by a nuclear blast. The most conceptual reference has to be the patch of grass. It sits on the edge of the destruction, acting almost as a barrier from it. It reminds the viewer of what is being lost. The comparison image shows us a strikingly familiar scene. So much so, that it almost looks to be a visual reference image. The many incinerated trees and telephone poles poke up from the structural remains like reeds. The sky is blanketed with unsettling clouds of smoke. The similarities are undeniable between these two.

Finally, a still from Hayao Miyazaki’s *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*. The composition is fairly simple. We see an enormous fiery explosion, with a cloud shaped like a dome. There is a single onlooker, staring directly at the blast. Looking now for context, this image uses a representation of the now famous “mushroom cloud” that occurs in the aftermath of a nuclear blast. This cloud image itself is deeply symbolic to the Japanese of that destructive power. The composition of the onlooker, how she is cropped so close in the frame, and the explosion is so distant, yet it still goes over her head, truly makes her feel small. She evokes a feeling of helplessness in the face of that type of power. Looking at a picture of an actual mushroom cloud, the resemblance is clear in how it pillows upward, and then curls in at the sides. This image, as well as all of the others discussed previously, will forever be part of the Japanese visual culture.