Psychological Impact of Hiroshima/Nagasaki Bombings:

Photograph & Film Teaching Materials

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Both my students and I are very ill informed about the magnitude of damage, loss of life, and long-term consequences of our country’s atomic bombings of Hiroshima & Nagasaki. Although I remember so-called V-J Day, as a child I had no idea what devastation lay behind it. I try to stay aware that neither my students nor their parents were even living then. We are also dangerously uninformed about the status and ramifications of nuclear arms today.

This is a frightening time when the leadership of the United States seems bent on a new policy of “pre-emptive strikes” and on more military build-up. For example, the Senate voted just last month to lift a ban on research and development of so-called “mini nukes”. These are 5 kilotons or less, about a third as large as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Many are protesting that the so-called “bunker busters” or Robust Nuclear Earth Penetrators (RNEP) would kill many civilians, spread radioactive dust in the air, start a new arms race, and lower the nuclear barrier for more nations to cross. I understand that in Japan the Contingency laws enacted this month give the Self Defense Force more power than ever and that another bill may dispatch it to Iraq.

Studying these issues and finding effective pedagogical methods for our students today is critical for our planet and its people. I am so grateful for this conference to increase my own knowledge and stimulate new ideas for teaching. I have visited Hiroshima twice in years past and wept in this Peace Park and Museum. I am grateful to be here to once again remember acutely the holocaust.
As a teacher of standard curriculum in psychology, I have little opportunity to teach about nuclear war except to include it, for example, when discussing “post-traumatic stress disorder”, asking students to try to imagine it. I also try to teach by example by mentioning current events and announcing protests at nuclear testing sites and peace demonstrations in which I participate. Several times, however, I have had more opportunity when I have been fortunate to teach a course called The Japanese Psyche, in which I have more freedom to include the topic. This is a special course for Honors students, who are bright, thoughtful, motivated, and creative.

One exercise I have given them involves three photographs, each about eight-feet long, of Hiroshima’s devastation after the bomb. [I have brought only one of these today, but have the reference for ordering all three (Near Shima Hospital).] These three are already displayed on the walls when students arrive for class one day. Students are asked to use their respective major and minor fields of study to pretend they are mature professionals in their respective intended careers. They are invited to assume these roles and walk slowly along and stand in front of each photograph and imagine as vividly as they can being in Hiroshima before, during, and after the bomb. I suggest that they try to be aware of all five bodily senses and their accompanying thoughts and emotions. Then they are given time to record their reactions and plans of action in response to their experiences.

The honor students are quite creative in imagining how they might respond as a physicist, chemist, biologist, mathematician, economist, medical doctor or nurse, historian, political scientist, sociologist, psychologist, educator, musician, poet, or artist. Sorrow, shame, anger, & anxiety are expressed along with the scientific insights and artistic creations. Most impressive is the seriousness with which students share their work with the group and the somber atmosphere as they leave class that day. We might do a “micro” or “nano” workshop now. Would you take a moment to contemplate what your reactions and actions have been and will be.

Another resource is the website of physics professor Ray Wilson at Wesleyan Illinois University, who has made these photographs available. His homepage shows a photo similar to this as “What your government would let you see” and one like this from Barefoot Gen as “What your government did not want you to know or understand”. The latter would surely have even more emotional impact. The website has a description and syllabus for his course on “Problems of Nuclear Disarmament” and many rich links to other resources. He writes, “70 times per day every day of every year since 1945, that bomb which vaporized Hiroshima and its people, has, in effect, been recreated and stored in world arsenals; 70 per day, every day. Will we ever learn? I doubt it, but I keep trying and teaching (Wilson, 1997).

In April (2003), sociologist Akiko Hashimoto of the University of Pittsburgh spoke at the University of Texas about pedagogies about war in Japan. Her research with focus groups of teachers revealed that they felt they had not learned about World War II, couldn’t make up test questions after the Meiji period, were reprimanded if they did put World War II on exams, used their own handouts rather than rely on texts, avoided
teaching about it, or were careful not to leave a “paper trail”. Consistent with this, focus
groups of young people in their twenties revealed their memory that textbooks covered
Heian, Edo, and Meiji periods, and a bit on Taisho, but hardly anything on Showa
(1926-1989). Instead they learned more from mass media like manga (e.g. Barefoot
Gen), TV, newspapers, and film. Like them, I believe students in the United States
have learned very little about World War II, and what was taught was from an American
perspective. For them, too, film is a powerful medium that may teach something more
than and different from textbooks.

Students may have already seen, for example, The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951), On
the Beach (1959), Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the
Bomb (1964), China Syndrome (1979), Silkwood (1983), The Peacemaker (1997), The
Sum of All Fears (2001), or others of the hundreds of American movies related to
nuclear arms or radiation that have been produced.

Such movies or movie clips can be excellent stimuli for class discussion and debate.
Some students may want to design more thorough term projects. For example, one can
analyze factual accuracy of bomb movies and/or changes in them across time as
related to history and politics. One can evaluate their entertainment versus educational
versus artistic purposes and accomplishments. One can compare American versus
Japanese portrayals of and attitudes toward the bomb and nuclear arms.

In April (2003) I heard a lecture by Jerome Shapiro, former associate professor at
Hiroshima University and current researcher at the Wisconsin Center for Film and
Theater Research. I read his book Atomic Bomb Cinema (2002), which documents
1000 movies that have been released in the United States about the bomb or some
related topic like nuclear energy or radiation. One should note, however, that Shapiro
has been criticized for not focusing clearly on an anti-nuclear political position. Shapiro
seeks, instead, to analyze the meaning of the films, especially in Jungian and
sometimes Freudian psychological terms. He also notes how many atomic bomb films
use the bomb only as Hitchcock’s “MacGuffin”, i.e., a device around which to explore
other themes. One will certainly differ with him at times, but his documentation of the
movies provides enormous resources for students.

Students will discover that many of the films Shapiro discusses are not clearly anti-
bomb in focus, and they can read other authors who have criticized this. For example,
Donald Richie (1962) and Susan Sontag (e.g.1967) have argued that popular American
bomb movies do not make a responsible or adequate anti-bomb statement. Joyce
Evans (1998) says they are not realistic enough. Sociologist Robert J. Lifton (e.g. 1991,
Lifton & Mitchell, 1995) sees them as evidence of global psychological numbing to the
bomb. James Berger (1999) agrees and, to some extent, so does Mick Broderick
cycles in American society between paranoia about and denial of nuclear threat. Toni
Some of our students will have seen Godzilla/Godzilla/Mothra movies (1954, 1961, 1964) and possibly Naushika of the Valley of the Wind (1984), Akira (1988), Grave of the Fireflies (1988), Black Rain (1989), Rhapsody in August (1991) or other Japanese bomb movies. I did not like Akira, but I find the others I’ve listed excellent, especially in a course seeking to understand the Japanese psyche and include some content on nuclear war. I hope to locate while in Japan a film Asita that I saw here a few years ago. I wept at Grave of the Fireflies and sobbed at Asita! I’m also eager to see Natsushojo (1995).

Shapiro’s chapter on “Japan’s Atomic Bomb Cinema” discusses what he calls “hibakusha (survivor or explosion-affected persons) exploitation”, “gaman” (enduring), “mono no aware”, i.e., “appreciation of the bittersweet beauty of an existence in which everything is born and dies in time but the essential nature of things does not change” (Shapiro, 2002, p. 264), the importance of relatedness to nature, recovery of balance and harmony and the importance of women and the feminine in this recovery, Jungian feminine symbols like water, the sea, and silk, Jung’s child motif, playfulness, integrating the disruptive Leech Child Hiruko, Buddhist philosophy regarding suffering, and reconciliation with death and meaning in life. Such concepts are valuable to understand the Japanese psyche and to live in a nuclear age.

If time allows, we can discuss some of these films or others that have been most impactful in your life and useful in your teaching.

References


Near Shima Hospital (The Hiroshima Panorama Project): http://titan.iwu.edu/~rwilson/hiroshima/ To order 3 photo-panoramas from different perspectives, each about 8 ft long, send $25 check or money order & mailing address: Near Shima Hospital, Linda Lane, Normal, IL 61761, USA.


Movies Cited

Director? (date)? Asita (Tomorrow)

Bridges. (1979). China Syndrome

Honda, Inoshiro (1954) Gojira (released as Godzilla in 1956)
(1961) Mosura (Kresel, Lee,1962, Mothra)
(1964) Mosura tai Gojira (Godzilla vs Mothra), etc.

Imamura. (1989). Black Rain (Kuroi Ame)

Kramer. (1959). On the Beach

Kubrick. (1964). Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb

Kurasawa(1991). Rhapsody in August (Hachigatsu no rapusodi)

Leder. (1997). The Peacemaker
Miyazaki. (1984). Naushika of the Valley of the Wind (Kaze no tani no Naushika)

Morikawa, Tokihisa (1995). Natsushoojo (Summer Girl)


Robinson. (2001). The Sum of All Fears


Wise. (1951). The Day the Earth Stood Still