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Atomic Visions

The slayers and the slain have memories equally long. That much seems clear fifty-odd years after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Beyond a common passion of remembrance, however, very little appears to be shared. In fact, the bombings continue to be a major source of political contention. Despite a growing reserve of historical documentation, including formerly classified military information, there is meager consensus when it comes to deriving the meaning of these events. History devolves into a brawl of interpretation.

This was glaringly evident in commemorative exhibitions scheduled in Washington and Hiroshima to mark the fiftieth anniversaries of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima-Nagasaki. The Washington curators opted for an airborne perspective. Their objective was valedictory and artifacts were selected with this in mind. The polished fuselage of the Enola Gay was displayed as a trophy to honor the sacrifices of American veterans. The Hiroshima curators, by contrast, were soberingly earthbound in their focus. The photographs they selected were intended to speak to the wound: the civilian victims and human consequences of the bombings. Oceans apart, these exhibitions seemed irreconcilable. But there was an odd commonality between them, a link of method rather than message.

The ideal history is an empirical one, which reflects what is placed in front of it. The ideal history pushes toward certitude. It is ideal because it denies that there is anything visible beyond it: no edges, no resistance, no horizon. While thematically adverse, both exhibitions foregrounded this ideal. Viewers entering the Washington and Hiroshima museums—while traveling through two separate tunnels, following two unequal monologues—were engaged in parallel quests for naked truth.

It is somewhat ironic that projects which have variously sought to remember and forget the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have shared a similar relationship to the visible. There is continuity to be found in their approach to pictorial language, the way they select

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images to keep a given history company, to demonstrate a thought. Images, in their mere presence, their mime of immediacy, provide proof positive that an argument is credible. They are systematically used to confirm and convince.

In the end, of course, the curators in Washington and Hiroshima remain mimetic rivals. Visual evidence continues to lend form to *both* protest *and* patriotism. Messages deriving from the visible—because tied to ideology—can lead to the inauguration *or* cessation of hostilities. *All things not being equal,* it is important that we maintain sight of how power and institutional relations persist in differentiating among narrations of the visual field—giving primacy to certain memorial visions and interpretations over others. But the tendency among enactors of collective memory to deny ambivalence, to turn away from the unknown and unwitnessed, also warrants consideration. From the point of view of the empiricist, a perspective that recognizes contradiction and uncertainty is ultimately unwelcome, but it is precisely what these events demand.

Thus, while exploring how collective memory has been swayed, even corrupted, through censured atomic-bomb imagery, this chapter queries tactics of protest which have no drive other than the exchange of images. To simply replace old images with new ones is a restrictive enterprise, presupposing, for starters, that images can speak for themselves. In the case of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, there has never been unanimity of meaning relating to the visual field. Even the most renowned pictures—the *Mushroom Cloud* being a prime example—have been stamped with contradictory and confusing messages.

Images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in other words, have never been transparently or unilinearly "received." Each picture has entered a historically and ideologically saturated field of visibility, only to be interpreted and reinterpreted against the grain of other images, which together constitute our perception of the past. These assorted pictures are further linked and mediated by narratives—narratives that, in the case of the atomic bombings, have doled out memories both triumphant and scorched. What is seen, what is deemed plausible as visual evidence, is clearly tied to what we know and have learned. Yet popular disputes about the accuracy of Hollywood depictions of history regularly remind us that facts and figures are open topics for debate. Directors of films ranging from *Mississippi Burning* to *Nixon* to *Evita* have stood accused of turning erstwhile villains into heroes, of painting glory out of human anguish. Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* has undergone every conceivable analysis for its representation of events surrounding the Holocaust of European Jewry.

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It only takes an afternoon on the Internet to realize that discussion groups abound on the very question of how popular culture relays—or, for that matter, distorts—history. These discussions, while sharing fairly predictable terms, reveal in concrete ways that questions of plausibility and truth are ongoing arenas of social combat and power, such that one community's selection of very-important-and-evocative visual evidence may be dismissed by another community as propaganda, trivia, or sentimentalism. That historical interpretation is always a matter of judgment and value does not lessen its impact. In its insights and blindnesses, interpretation is social comment. It reverberates on the lives of the living.

Thus, it becomes important to test the limits of our historical frames: What counts as plausible visual evidence and knowledge? By dint of what assignations, and under what circumstances, does "seeing become believing"? Or, for that matter, "believing become seeing"? The historical frames that shape our encounters with visual culture (whether scrolled on the big screen or mounted on museum walls) imply that there are no "simple" relations of seeing. There is nothing direct or untrammeled about the act of perception.

The task, then, is not one of replacing one visual history with another more truthful one—but of reflecting on the possible uses of visual material in organizing memory practices. Thus, I have provided in the pages that follow an initial exploration of some of the central images and visual metaphors that have coaxed and, in some cases, framed memories of the atomic bombings. At the same time, I have looked to the historical and political conditions of invisibility that have established a unique emphasis on evidence in relation to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Voided Imagination

In the cinematic adaptation of Matsuji Ibuse's *Black Rain* (directed by Shohei Imamura), the theme of a vanished city recurs. Protagonists wander through the desolate ruins, their words echoing loss amid their motionless surroundings: "It blinded me, I could see nothing" . . . "I hear Hiroshima vanished" . . . "Where is Hiroshima? It disappeared."

Hiroshima and Nagasaki represent the sudden "voiding" of human life and its remains. The atomic bombs threatened to devour the visible world in its entirety. To be sure: 13,983 people were missing without trace after the first blast. This is not a toll of the dead, these are humans who *literally* disappeared from the field of vision: "Were they

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murdered, vaporized, or transformed into shadows, mushroom cloud, or black rain? Were they high school students, children, mothers, or grandfathers, reduced to memory, to physical and emotional voids? Are they now only numbers, transformed into disembodied specters for reasons of state?" (Gerson 1995, 27)

Positivist approaches to representation have been generated on the site of this unfathomable and incalculable loss. They accord with the experience of annihilation. They address a world swallowed up by a single explosion. Their message is potent. If the traces were rendered *unclear*, if American censorship codes *concealed* the human consequences, if the effects of radiation and the deadly atomic-bomb disease had the power to destroy people *invisibly*, if the city was rebuilt before the devastation could be properly documented, then the task is to reconstruct as *total* a picture as possible—a picture extracted from the lingering traces of disaster. Such pictures may act as talisman against the dissolution of memory.

Nothing summarizes this longing for repletion, this desire to compose a pictorial chronicle, more eloquently than an image evoked by Lisa Yoneyama in her essay "Taming the Memoryscape: Hiroshima's Urban Renewal." Yoneyama reminds us that as a result of Hiroshima's fierce and literally blinding flash, many people partially or totally lost their eyesight. She describes a national railway worker, a *hibakusha* (atomic-bomb survivor), who was nineteen when he lost his left eye in the bombing:

> In the ten years since his retirement, this man has been searching on his own for what he calls "the atom bomb claw marks" (*tsumeato*), that is, the relics of the bomb, and compiling their photographs and his detailed handwritten explanations into a booklet. He takes with him almost everywhere a hefty high-tech camera, splendidly equipped with automatic focus and zoom and wide-angle lenses. . . . It is as if, through his tenacious search for the "clawmarks," he is reconfirming his own life, the fact that he had survived, although with irreparable impairment: the camera substitutes for his lost eye. He criticized the city's attitude: "I feel as though I must continue to take pictures of the ruins so that I can help protect the human rights of the dead" (*shinsha no jinken yumon o mamoranya*). (1995, 121)

The precision with which the man goes about mechanically recording a lost world is existential. It is also political. In honoring the dead, he wants to call forth the legacy of nuclear violence. Every picture, he

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FIGURE 1.1. *August 10, 1945, Nagasaki.* Photo by Yosuke Yamahata. Photo courtesy of Shogo Yamahata.

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feels, takes on added dimension as these events recede from immediate public concern. Their historical load grows heavier as time and interest passes.

If the memory of things is to deter, where is that memory? Testimony beseeching us to remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki assume a renewed sense of urgency in a world in which eleven countries now have the capacity to threaten nuclear war (Gerson, xvi).[1] Proposing that many North Americans have been beguiled into apathy by relative social calm, nuclear critics from Robert Jay Lifton to Jacques Derrida have advised us not to forget that we continue to live in an atomic age: an age where policy and possibility remain governed by the specter of global annihilation. The tens of thousands of nuclear warheads existing in our global arsenal, they argue, continue to wreak havoc on our notions of peace and order. Even as these missiles remain "safely" esconced in their silos, the mere mention of the Bomb has the power to secure consent and compliance.

The Bomb, without even being used, has, in fact, shaped the terms of virtually every major conflict since 1945. Its presence as a means of absolute destruction has shaped tolerance and acceptance of other forms of warfare—whether it be the use of napalm in Vietnam or carpet-bombing in Iraq. The language of "conventional" weapons as applied to non-nuclear arsenal has made them sound comparatively benign, tame, ordinary.

Military rhetoric continues to pose obstacles to witnessing. From the "precision" bombings of 1945 to the "smart" bombings of 1991, war propaganda has tended to obscure the consequences of civilian death. Suffering has been trivialized through euphemistic battle talk. In the case of the Gulf War, the North American public was left with little incentive to imagine the massive human fallout of "limited-strikes," the messy "collateral damage" left in the wake of this *clean* and *precise* war.

With war trauma persistently submitted to various forms of rhetorical damage-control, the temptation to wholly abandon the field of witnessing cannot be underestimated. How can we maintain sight of the human effects of modern warfare amid the lull of military techno-speak and against the rapid commerce of time? Or more specifically: To what extent can memories of Hiroshima and Nagasaki endure?

The concern that memory of the atomic bombings has been evicerated from public conscience has motivated memorial campaigns venturing to draw increased attention to the clawmarks of war. In March 1977, most notably, a project was initiated to bring Hiroshima

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and Nagasaki into the imagination of North Americans, to call forth the human consequences of nuclear warfare. This project, culminating in a 350-page book entitled *Hiroshima-Nagasaki: A Pictorial Record of the Atomic Destruction* (1978), was culled from the voluntary labor of thousands of Japanese citizens. In direct response to the legislated suppression of visual records of the bomb by U.S. officials, and increasingly virulent cold-war sloganeering, these volunteers sifted through over four thousand photos by both Japanese and American photographers. The selected photos have been assembled alongside a selection of survivors' paintings (Brett 1986, 120). The book, conceived as a commemorative gift, has since been distributed free of charge. In late 1978, members of the committee that produced the book formed a delegation to take it to the UN General Assembly on the occasion of the First Special Session for Disarmament (Brett 1986, 123). One delegate remarked on the dearth of knowledge of Hiroshima and Nagasaki among the Americans they met with:

> Only a limited number of Americans who were the leaders of the peace movement and their followers had seen a few photographs of the atomic destruction. Two-thirds of the people whom I met at the exhibitions of the panelled photographs held on street corners did not know about the historical evidence of *Hiroshima-Nagasaki*. Namely, they knew nothing about the fact that the government of their own country dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a result, I felt keenly the necessity to show them the visual records of the atomic disaster. (Brett 1986, 123)

More recently, photographs of Nagasaki taken by Yosuke Yamahata on August 10, 1945, have been curated into a touring exhibition for international viewers. Yamahata's photos—which include the famous image of a Nagasaki child holding a rice ball—provide the centerpiece for *Nagasaki Journey*, a book published on the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings (Pomegranate Artbooks). The book shows acres and acres of burnt-out landscape, torched buildings, bodies charred beyond recognition. In several photos, the bodies appear lost—buried amid wood beams and mounds of debris, flesh camouflaged by black and white emulsion. Looking at these pictures, the viewer is left to deduce a sense of violence from the stimulus of neutral tones.

Both these book projects communicate how in war, civilians become invisible. They have sought to enlarge the scope of our historical vision by returning the spotlight to the dead and maimed. They

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are pictorial-based interventions waged against all the weapons and words that contract our understanding of the *embodied* effects of nuclear war.

Instrumental Visions

> In 1945 there was some debate about how the atomic bomb should be used. A few scientists held out for a demonstration shot at night over the water rather than the annihilation of a city full of people. But offshore fireworks would have left almost everything to the imagination. War planners knew that this new weapon's devastating power had to be *seen to be believed*. Such was the opening premise of the atomic age, and it was acted on with conviction.
>
> But something curious happened to the new bomb's fresh visibility: it quickly vanished behind a succession of phrases about "breakthroughs in physics," "saving American lives," and "ending the war." (*my emphasis*)[2]

Pictures of war tend to be belated in their arrival—destined, as they are, to record rather than halt the dropping of bombs and the hurtling of missiles. Some pictures, however, come later than others. It was a week before official photographs of the bombings were released to the North American press. The first image to appear before the American public, in *Life Magazine* (August 20, 1945), was a military photograph taken from a cockpit thousands of feet above Hiroshima. This bird's-eye view excluded even the city below, focusing instead on the spectacle of a mushroom cloud, its expanding mass of smoke distorting a still sky. The still-frame image, which would later become a powerful symbol in Cold War power brokering, was undeniably memorable. Its visual power was heightened because it was so immediately distinctive. Yet with no sign of human presence, the mushroom-cloud image seemed to support a technocratic vision. What eye but that of a machine, a camera, could safely gaze upon this calamitous spectacle with such calm tranquility? (Nelson 1987, 32) Detached from flesh and context, the mushroom cloud could be seen by some as the culmination of scientific progress, even worthy of adorning a proposed U.S. commemorative stamp.[3]

The mushroom cloud is, for many critics, a monstrous example of the kind of mind-image that remains lodged at an insulated abstract distance. Photographer and writer Robert Del Tredici, addressing the scarcity of images of nuclear war, has noted: "the only thing that

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comes to anybody's mind as an image is a mushroom cloud, a little pointy weapon and a cooling tower. That's about the extent of the imagery."[4] The cloud's iconographic hold, its ability to obscure other views, is seen as a sign and symptom of human absence. The cloud, Del Tredici argues, has vaporized memory of its human target. If only the cloud could be thinned, scattered, we would be able to see the wreckage beyond.

Visual materials censored by the U.S. government, and concealed in large part from the viewing public until 1980, become the necessary precondition for splitting the bomb's representations into two zones of visibility. The one gaze beclouded of any human trace, the other gaze concertedly turned to the irradiated body: the image of affliction and suffering.[5]

This splitting of vision is dramatized in "Ground Zero" (1995), a prototypical documentary made for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which features "the men who dropped the bomb and the people who were under it."[6] Statements made by Charles Sweeney, a crew member aboard the infamous *Enola Gay*, narrate an eclipse of vision. His voice-over is accompanied by a visual aerial map of the city he describes:

> We could see the city just lying there like it looked in the pictures. A beautiful military target. We picked as close to the geographical center of the population area as we could. And there was a temple right by the bridge, so the temple crossing the bridge in the water gave us a good aiming target. It was a T-bridge in the form of a T itself. And I saw the bomb leave his airplane. I did say to myself, 'Gee, there it goes. It's a live one. It's the first live one I've ever seen. And there aren't any strings on it. We can't pull it back. It's for better or for worse, it's gone . . .'

The documentary subsequently cuts to ground zero. Here, the narrator tells us of a Japanese man who remembers watching the *Enola Gay* as it passed overhead, wondering if it would drop anything. Another *hibakusha* recounts his impressions of the aftermath: "We were in total darkness, we could not see anything." The screen rolls with footage taken at a distance of thirty thousand feet, presumably from the cockpit of the *Enola Gay*. We return to Sweeney's point of view : "Nothing we could see but smoke. A burbling cloud." The final cut in this visual interchange is to a series of photographs. We are told that these were the first photos taken in the aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing. Civilians walk with flesh dripping. Charred human remains and

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debris litter a desolate horizon. Yet despite the array of disturbing images that flicker across the screen, this documentary, and others like it, maintain that pictures of atomic warfare can only be viewed in *retrospect,* that is, with the hindsight of today. We now have proximate access to ground zero, but, for the bomber pilots involved in the aerial attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the human ramifications were elusive. From the vantage point of a cockpit, the target was simply too abstract; the explosion too spellbinding.

The message is simple, if deceptively so. Broaching the human consequences of nuclear warfare requires breaking from spectacle: the framing of a city as a "dot" on a bombing map. The horror needs to be brought into sharper focus. To see the aerial maps alone adheres to a perspective that allowed civilians to be dehumanized under the monolithic sign of an "enemy target"—a target fixed within boundaries dividing an *us* from a *them*. That the gulf between the bombers and the bombed had racist, if not genocidal, overtones was made manifest in a statement President Truman recorded a mere two days after civilians perished in Nagasaki: "When you have to deal with a beast, you have to treat him as a beast" (Gerson 1995, 38). Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King's official declaration was consonant with Truman's: "It is fortunate that the use of the bomb should have been upon the Japanese rather than upon the white races of Europe."[7]

Blurry reconnaissance photos of Hiroshima, which sketched a damage-radius bereft of bodies, fortified President Truman's initial insistence that the target was military in nature, serving to emotionally and cognitively distance North American viewers from the immediate aftermath of the atomic bombings. The illusion of complete aerial surveillance, while producing allegedly objective and informed spectators, made witnessing virtually impossible. As Joyce Nelson has remarked, the near-total elimination of "the bombings' effect on human beings—a complete exclusion of the irradiated human body from public view—shifted North American attention away from lasting corporeal destruction to what Truman, in his press statement of August 7, 1945, called 'the greatest achievement of organized science in history'" (Nelson 1987, 31). Through a feat of rhetorical alchemy Truman seemed to successfully turn swords into ploughshares. Leaders and generals since Truman have prudently followed his lead, proving that showing nothing or very little of war's human remains can be effective military strategy.[8]

Yet while the Truman administration worked hard to curtail information *after* the bombings, the collapse of witnessing around

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Hiroshima and Nagasaki was actually ensured from the beginning—long before the crew of the *Enola Gay* departed for Japan. The thrust toward atomizing knowledge has, in essence, been paradigmatic in the creation of the Nuclear New World since the early days of the Manhattan Project. The inability of workers, whose labor was highly compartmentalized, to imagine the end result (which in itself was an unimaginable horror), was enhanced by an instrumental vision of war and production. Scientists working on the Manhattan Project were isolated and sworn to silence in their research pursuits for reasons of national security. The idea that knowledge was "forbidden" was further enforced by the sudden and total ban in 1940 on any publications about nuclear fission (Ruthven 1993, 7).[9] This history of open suppression deferred the possibility of acquiring testimonies from the inside for many years.

For the majority of us who come to these events as belated witnesses, procuring historical knowledge is crucial. Knowledge is necessary if we are to counteract the mythic characterizations of these events, penetrate techno-babble designed to keep basic information in the hands of elite strategists and researchers. It is vital if we are to see the relationship between various fragmented and dispersed visions—the connections between views from ground zero and from above (from inside and outside of the event). The censorship period, which we will come to shortly, enforced a separation between these visions. We need to find ways of setting them in a moving dialogue.

Nonetheless, the struggle to make relational sense of these events, the desire to gain knowledge, may not be adequately active, ethical acts of seeing. To simply "picture" and "know" the human effects of the bombings has carried no assurance of ethical remembrance. The legacy of the U.S. Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (ABCC) draws this point back into focus. The commission, which sought to chronicle the effects of radiation fallout on the bodies of the *hibakusha*, turned survivors into objects of research rather than treatment and responsibility. Bodies were taken out of the debris of history—tagged, charted, and coded—and recirculated as silent documents. To add insult to injury, the collected evidence and photographs concerning the irradiated bombing victims was not declassified for several decades.[10] When we look at the ABCC photos today, we can see that they were designed solely for clinical interests. The *hibakusha* who posed for them seem thoroughly uncomfortable, conscious of the fact that they were chosen as specimens.

The history of the ABCC research mission raises the issue of an inherent bias toward objectification in vision itself, which too easily

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appropriates bodies from their social and historical biographies. The question, thus, becomes: what images can activate a social-biographic imagination on the part of the viewer? Clearly, naturalism and portraiture are insufficient. The ABCC photos perhaps provided a representational form for calibrating the physical suffering of human beings against the generalizing technologies of science. Yet at no point did the use of descriptive naturalism by the ABCC have anything to say of the victims' substantive and historical experiences. The photos did not address the specific historical character of their disfigurement—working instead to freeze understanding of the still-unfolding dimensions of *hibakusha* suffering. Through this aperture, suffering was depicted as *atomic*, that is, discrete and manageable. Researchers were not there to empathize with or support the victims. They were there to sift the evidence, to measure the past in inches and yards.

The purpose of shifting our ways of looking at visual culture would be to provide grounds for challenging the objectification of experience—whether it be undertaken in the name of science or research. Sorting through what is missing, what cannot be envisioned, by a representational practice reveals how images are constructed and invested in historical perspective. Our ways of imagining the past are riddled with inscriptions of power. How might we identify the political agencies and commitments made possible through representational practices? This is a question of preeminent importance to witnessing.

In reclaiming vision as a source of situated knowledge and as a basis for ethical action, the task becomes one of marking the commitments we bring to bear on visual practices. In short, reflecting on the ways we are ethically implicated in our looking would require rejecting a standpoint of transcendent access that seeks to overcome all limits and responsibility. Heeding the call to witness requires that I answer for passivity, that I respond to practices that deny the possibility of being responsible (or capable of response). Representational practices that indulge in a pornography of violence preempt possibilities of envisioning a less oppressive world that rejects the use of subjugation and aggression. What is, thus, called for is a partial vision that understands its contingency, while seeking to understand the social practices and objectifying tendencies that not only facilitated the mass obliteration of civilians under the sign of "enemy target," but made this process inevitable. Because the concept of vision has been so central in securing knowledge about the bombings, it must be heavily scrutinized *and* used.

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The Censored Eye

> The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.
>
> —President Harry Truman

> The power to see, the power to make visible, is the power to control.
>
> —David Michael Levin

In September 1945 Japan's major newsreel company, Nichiei Productions, sent a documentary film crew to Hiroshima. Ordered by American authorities to stop shooting in Nagasaki, they prepared for confrontation as they arrived in Hiroshima. They were finally granted permission by occupying authorities to complete a nineteen-reel film entitled *Effects of the Atomic Bomb* with the proviso that upon completion it would be turned over in its entirety to the American Occupation Forces. The crew complied, but only after several members had secretly made a duplicate print of more than half of the original film. This footage was carefully stored in a photographic lab in the suburbs of Tokyo (Lifton 1967, 453; Braw 1991, 4–5). It was not until July 1952, shortly after the U.S. Occupation had ended, that the hidden footage was retrieved and portions of the documentary were screened "with great excitement" in movie houses across Japan (Lifton 1967, 454). The footage featured extensive shots of radiation and burn victims. One section showed the silhouette of a painter on a ladder, with arm and brush extended: a man etched permanently by the blast onto the surface of a concrete wall (Lifton and Mitchell 1995, 58). For most Japanese civilians, this was their first opportunity to become visually and affectively immersed in the terrors of the atomic bomb experience.[11]

With scarce exception, representations of the bombings were guarded from the public imagination for a decade, and several decades in the case of classified government documents.[12] Between September 1945 and September 1951, all interpretive responses to the bombings fell within the jurisdiction of a Press Code. The Code, introduced by American Occupation authorities, imposed *prior censorship* on anything written for broadcast or publication. The motivations behind the Press Code are sobering: the U.S. government did not want any evidence of the bombings to circulate. Suppression of evidence became the surest means of quelling dissent and garnering support for any further use of the atomic bombs in the emerging Cold War era, in

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which the Soviet Union would also obtain the Bomb.

Atomic-bomb historian Paul Boyer has focused on the censorship period as a pivotal moment in the scripting of atomic-bomb history for the American public: "From the beginning, the entire Hiroshima/Nagasaki story was carefully stage-managed by the American military. The first accounts, written by William L. Laurence, who was in effect functioning as the Manhattan Project's public-relations man, simply recorded the visual observations of the bomb crews" (1985, 187).

What has qualified as visual "evidence," as Boyer notes, has been circumscribed. The U.S. government worked concertedly to organize the visual field surrounding the atomic bombings. We might say that there are many visions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but what if there is only one enforced vision? Does this not limit historical interpretation? Reviewing this legacy of censorship and suppression brings us closer to understanding how the war was prosecuted through a discourse of "popular" consent, how it was representationally restricted, and why, fifty years later, battles over the visual record persist.

Press censorship in post-war Japan applied to every facet of cultural production. Films, novels, children's books, musical recordings were all subject to careful scrutiny. So thorough were the censoring officials that anything thought to engender a threat to "public tranquility," anything that implied the bombings were a "crime against humanity," was eligible.[13] Writers were prohibited from even mentioning the censorship codes, leading one poet to comment, "we were not allowed to write about the atomic bomb during the Occupation. We were not even allowed to say that we were not allowed to write about the atomic bomb" (Braw 1991, 7). On more than one occasion, the publication ban was used as a basis for harassing and threatening artists into compliance. Well-known novelist and *hibakusha* Yoko Ota was interrogated by American officials about her novel-manuscript, *The Town of Corpses*, and *tanka* poet Shione Shoda was warned that if she defied the Code, and published her *tanka* collection, she would be sentenced to the death penalty.[14]

American and international journalists were also subject to interrogation. Among the first Americans to visit Nagasaki after the war was a documentary film crew. They recorded rare color images, which the U.S. military ordered locked away for thirty years. Their chief concern was that the film footage would rouse too much public opposition to the use of nuclear weapons. Wilfred Burchett, a noted left-wing journalist working for the *London Daily Press* and the first foreign journal-

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ist to reach Hiroshima, faced a similar response when he attempted to file a report from "ground zero." His efforts to draw international attention to the plight of civilians who were dying of radiation effects brought him into direct confrontation with the censors, who claimed he had fallen victim to Japanese propaganda. After his visit, Allied journalists were barred entry to Hiroshima for several years.[15] The journalists that arrived subsequently were members of *official* American delegations.

Postwar censorship codes operated to mute the voices of atomic victims and conceal rudimentary information about the effects of nuclear warfare and radiation. The consequences were manifold, impairing treatment of the victims and distorting the postwar global nuclear debate. As Monica Braw notes, "A full picture is difficult to form of anything, but regarding the atomic bomb, there was one aspect concerning which a reasonably accurate picture could have been made but was not, because of American censorship. This was the after-effects of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (1991, 155).

The censorship period inflated the demand for narratives of the bombings' effects. A history of prohibition added to the perception that in retrieving representations from government and military storehouses, the truth about history might be made accessible. The images and texts that did reach audiences became replete with meaning, saddled with the task of testifying to all that had been endured. But, here, the idea that history (and consciousness) could be directly accessed once the proper resources were found, and once writers and artists were granted reprieve from censorship, assumed that these found and liberated testimonies would generate self-evident meanings. What could not be anticipated was how context and contingency would influence encounters with these new narratives. In particular, whether the new narratives would be, or not be, taken up so as to enable transformations in collective thought and action.

While unfolding on the other side of the Pacific, the history of John Hersey's article "Hiroshima" (1946) is revealing. Published in *The New Yorker* one full year after the bombings, Hersey's chronicle from ground zero crowded American newstands with the stories of six Hiroshiman civilians living through the bombing and its grim aftermath. "Hiroshima" employed a popular genre of human-interest journalism which relied heavily on naturalist description and individual profiles. Numbers were replaced by names in an account that attempted to individuate the effects of a decision made with a lump-target in mind. This was a move toward countering a vast array of

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allied war propaganda which portrayed the enemy as wholly inhuman. The most egregious examples of stereotyping were to be found in American pop culture. North American newspapers regularly featured bespectacled kamikaze-types and maniacal buck-toothed Japanese civilians who were portrayed as bearing a vicious disregard for human life. Under these circumstances, "Hiroshima" must be understood intially as an oppositional text. Released at a time when over three-quarters of the American population polled still approved of the bombings, it served to counter the reigning popular opinion. At the time Hersey first wrote, there was nothing banal about testimonies from ground zero. The survivors' experiences were emerging, quite literally, from the shadows.

Yet while initially breaking with dominant framings of the bombings, "Hiroshima" quickly became a "runaway bestseller" (Boyer 1985, 204). Controversy waned and "Hiroshima" soon settled comfortably among the folds of old knowledge and sentiment to become what Paul Boyer has called a "cathartic end-point" for many Americans (1985, 209). In providing an opportunity to vent emotion, in focusing on human anguish rather than on the political relations which had produced such suffering, Hersey's text "could be depoliticised at the very moment when—in a move subsequently characteristic of Cold War literary politics—it was being lauded for its humanity and aestheticised for its style" (Ruthven 1993, 39). "Hiroshima," thus, succeeded more in arousing the conditions necessary for a reaffirmation of American moral conscience and humanist sympathy than in inciting readers to critically question the political and ethical legitimacy of the Bomb's deployment and nuclearism more generally.[16] A public's will to know about the past conformed to what appeased its sense of identity at the time—an identity founded on grounds defined as democratic, just, and moral. "Hiroshima" entered the scene as an upstart testimony, but eventually a truce was worked out.

Acknowledging that testimonial forms may be transgressive at the moment of their introduction, the history of John Hersey's "Hiroshima" begs the question of how testimony can be made to endure in such ways as to prompt ongoing reflection. What possibilities do texts of public memory open up? What do they close off?

Scripting Events

Representational practices are critical in shaping and shifting our notions of what is worth perceiving. They produce a grammar for look-

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ing. In many instances they also produce the material basis for knowledge claims, thus determining precepts for social action and response.

The films, exhibitions, books, and monuments that largely mediate public consciousness of historical events have tended to adhere to realist conventions; they chase, you might say, a faith in objective representation. Yet as the 1995 Smithsonian Institute controversy indicated, no representational practice can ever be completely or positively realist. Here, an anniversary exhibition intended to commemorate the "Last Act: the Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II" was eventually abandoned after a Veteran's group successfully lobbied for the removal of ground zero artifacts and references. The controversy, which revealed an ongoing reluctance among certain Americans to confront human *evidence* of the bombings, flagged the limits of positivist commemoration: What are the details that count? What and why are people being asked to remember? The Smithsonian controversy, pivoting around issues of historic representation, raised compelling questions about the role visual culture plays in the formation of collective memory. How the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be remembered, and on what evidentiary terms, were the central issues up for debate.

The curators' original proposal was to "address the significance, necessity and morality of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki."[17] Curators from the Smithsonian requested to borrow objects from the Hiroshima Peace Museum to provide a view from ground zero. Among the selected items were a boy's tricycle, a watch fixed at 8:15 AM, and a girl's incinerated lunchbox still containing carbonized food. The inclusion of these artifacts, photographs of bomb victims, and a text-piece that questioned the estimated number of American lives that were saved by the bomb, formed the center of the ensuing controversy. Conservative critics charged the Smithsonian curators with spin-doctoring history to secure a seamless portrait of Japanese victimization. In short, they stood accused of exploiting tendentious sympathies that were more attuned to "political correctness" than historical truth.

After intense pressure from veterans groups and several members of Congress, the exhibition was rescripted to emphasize Japanese expansionism and war atrocities. Any mention of the effects of the bombs on civilians, any reference connecting the bombings to postwar nuclear proliferation, was removed. Paul Tibbets Jr., former captain of the B-29 bomber that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, was part of a veterans group protesting the initial exhibition proposal. In September 1994, the lobby had succeeded in getting the U.S. Senate to adopt a res-

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olution stating that the "atomic bomb put a merciful end to the war."[18]

Prior to the last script-cut, six pictures of people injured by the bombings and one photo of a person killed were retained. When lobbying pressure continued unabated, even these images were cut. The final proposal essentially excluded any interpretive commentary. The exhibition was winnowed down to the *Enola Gay* fuselage, a plaque, and a video tape of the pilots recalling their flight. Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich (a former history professor) proclaimed the final exhibition script to be a victory against "historical revisionism," and applauded the Smithsonian for recognizing that "the vast majority of Americans think that political correctness may be okay in some faculty lounge, but that the Smithsonian is a treasure that belongs to the American people and it should not become a plaything for left-wing ideologies."[19]

The decision to remove all discussion and analysis of the historical context of the bombings (on the basis that such analysis would be transgressive of a privileged commemorative narrative of the bombings), was met with criticism by several prominent U.S. historians, editors, and journalists. In response, Michael Heyman, Secretary of the Smithsonian, issued a public statement defending the institute's position:

> I have concluded that we made a basic error in attempting to couple an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the end of the war. In this important anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honour and commemorate their valour and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke.[20]

The controversy exposed how fraught publicly financed civic commemorations can become when they question patriotic assumptions about historical events. More importantly, it provided a critique of naive positivism. (An evidentiary display was devouring itself. How could it claim to represent the whole when parts were rapidly disappearing?)

The Smithsonian controversy showed that what is accepted as knowledge and evidence is constrained by the context of its presentation. Using an openly honorific discourse (valorizing U.S. veterans), the institute was able to name the character of those constraints, and thus, in turn, characterize what would be deemed as transgressive.

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The Smithsonian curators, having been accused of impugning veterans, met to negotiate with the American Legion, then settled on a script that rubber-stamped a victory narrative of Hiroshima. The revised script, in other words, chiefly supported the idea that the use of atomic bombs on Japan had justly avoided a bloody invasion of the mainland and, in so doing, had saved a million American lives. This script, which spoke of the Bomb exclusively as a preserver rather than a destroyer of human life, mastered the tricky task of uniting the incompatible: a grisly military massacre with American ideals of decency and concern for life.

The remarkable fact is that carefully prepared press releases, penned two months *prior* to the actual bombings, have retained primacy in the recording of atomic-bomb history. This earlier history, conceived *before* the death of hundreds of thousands of civilians, could not of course register the *aftershock* of the bombs, the effects of radiation and the human fallout of nuclear weapons (then, at least, theoretically known). In stressing American humanity and achievement, it was a history that profoundly de-emphasized suffering.

Reporter William Laurence, recruited by the Truman administration and ranked among the more worshipful of bomb-witnesses, went so far as to embrace nuclearism as the ultimate symbol of human freedom. Describing the 1945 Trinity test explosion in New Mexico, he exclaimed increduously: "The mountain that grows above the clouds took the form for a fleeting instant of a gigantic Statue of Liberty, its arm raised to the sky, symbolizing the birth of a new freedom for man" (quoted in Lifton and Mitchell 1995, 16).[21] By invoking such hyperbolic terms as "destiny" and "divine justice," early reports of the Bomb were able to boast patriotic American feelings, while suppressing concern for the victims of the bombings. Truman's administration was well equipped to manage postatomic response: clichéd rationales were prepared to cascade over the American public even before the Enola Gay had left its hangar.

The battles over the Smithsonian script changes, which carried over to the editorial pages of major U.S. dailies, accented tensions that continue to shape memory-production about the bombings. More specifically, they showed that any effort to introduce a death-centered perspective was still apt to encounter obstinate opposition from conservative American lobbyists, politicians, and historians.

The tendency to whitewash atomic-bomb casualties (in prominent U.S. quarters) is dramatically—if expediently—challenged in Japan where Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been vaunted as symbols of Japanese suffering in the Pacific War. The contrast between Ameri-

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can narratives of national triumph and the Japanese focus on national martyrdom is sharp and unremitting. Atomic bomb narratives continue to draw on two absolute (or "patriotically correct") themes: victory or victimization.

In Japan, the exclusive focus on Japanese suffering has only recently been called into question. The 1994 renovations at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum marked a nascent, albeit overdue, commitment to challenge narratives that have neatly demarcated World War II victims and aggressors. In the new installation Japanese *hibakusha* and non-*hibakusha* are provocatively situated in relation to the tens of thousands of Korean laborers who died in the blast and suffered in its aftermath under conditions of systematic neglect. The renovated exhibition indicates that the place that has largely become known as a "City of Peace" had possessed, for many centuries, an unusually strong military identity. Originally the center of a feudal fiefdom, Hiroshima was known until the late nineteenth century as a castle town. The city was rapidly modernized during the Meiji Restoration, and by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 it served as the main military base for invasions on the Asian mainland. It maintained this function until the early phases of World War II. For some, most notably President Truman, this history of Japanese aggression would serve as fertile ground upon which to elaborate claims of "retribution."[22] In the context of the Peace Museum, however, the renovated perspective reflects an important modulation of ground zero history. The Smithsonian controversy and the renovations at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum lay bare ongoing contests over the meaning of the atomic bombings. These events have provided pedagogical openings by unraveling the seams of history. Through public battles waged in relation to the historical record, many people have been invited to become more conscious of the omissions that structure received evidence and information.

Categories of factual and neutral representation are not self-evident or natural criteria, but ways of buttressing a particular narrative, one that may come to assume the impossible and singular vantage point of objectivity. This is the essential dilemma facing all history writing. The facts we wish to verify are often bordered by those we may wish to obstruct. In the context of the Smithsonian, and, it can also be argued, in the context of the Peace Memorial Museum, notions of historical objectivity have been selectively deployed in such manner as to subordinate the memories of *others*.

While narrative closure cannot be assumed, given that a viewer's interpretive stance may open new meanings even in relation to the

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