

World War II as Trauma, Memory and Fantasy in Japanese Animation

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In her book *Hiroshima Traces* Lisa Yoneyama discusses how recent scholarship has tended to define memory in opposition to history, suggesting that “Memory has often been associated with myth or fiction and contrasted with History as written by professionals. [1] Yoneyama herself problematizes this opposition as a “false dichotomy,” stating that “the production of knowledge about the past ... is always enmeshed in the exercise of power and is always accompanied by elements of repression.” [2] She exhorts her readers to remember that, “we begin our investigations into the past with an awareness that historical ‘reality’ can only be made available to us through the mediation of given categories of representation and processes of signification.” [3] This article examines how one of the most significant events in modern Japanese history, defeat in the Second World War, is represented through the medium of animation, a medium which allows history and memory to transform into myth and even into fantasy, ultimately creating for the viewer an experience which allows for a working through of what might be called historical trauma.

Japanese popular culture has engaged with memories of the Second World War since at

least the early 1950’s when the first *Godzilla* (*Gojira*) film took on atomic testing, wholesale destruction and the American enemy in the form of a *kaiju eiga* or monster movie. Japanese manga (comic books) have revisited WWII often, especially in the works of Matsumoto Leiji whose depictions of aerial dogfights and last minute sacrifices gained a wide following. Since the 1960s, animated films and television series have produced some of the most memorable visions of the war. The two most famous of these are the remarkably faithful recreations or rememorations of cataclysmic events such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima depicted in *Barefoot Gen* (*Hadashi no Gen* 1983) and the final days of the war as seen by two children in Kobe shown in *Grave of Fireflies* (*Hotaru no haka*, 1988). In these two films personal memory on the part of the writers of the original texts (respectively Nakazawa Keiji on whose autobiographical manga *Barefoot Gen* is based and Nosaka Akiyuki who wrote the semi-autobiographical short story *Grave of Fireflies*), became part of a collective Japanese memory as the films were seen by millions of Japanese schoolchildren. But the war, the defeat and the atomic bomb also manifest themselves consistently in more displaced forms, most obviously in the overall fetishization of apocalypse which has been a staple of Japanese animation since the 1970’s to the present.

Here discussion focuses on one anime depiction, the *Space Battleship Yamato* (*Uchu Senkan Yamato*) television and film series from the 1970’s and what might be called the *Yamato’s* descendant, the series *Silent Service* (*Chinmoku no Kantai*) from the late 1990’s.

Both works refer explicitly to the Second World War at the same time as they go beyond history and memory to produce a cathartic and fantastic reworking of the loss.



The Space Battleship Yamato series premiered in October of 1974, three years earlier than the first Star Wars film. Like Star Wars and the 1960's American Star Trek series, however, Yamato can be seen as an immensely entertaining science fiction series, with memorable characters, cutting edge special effects (for the period), and compelling story lines, that also possesses a strong ideological subtext. In the case of Star Trek and Star Wars, this subtext is clearly linked to the period in which each was created. Star Trek with its introspective, racially mixed crew and regular invocation of the Enterprise's mission, "to seek out new worlds and new civilizations" may be seen as an optimistic answer to American anxieties during the Vietnam War, when many at home and abroad perceived America's advance into Southeast Asia as racist and imperialist. The original Star Wars trilogy, on the other hand, with its evil Galactic Empire and largely Caucasian cast, took place mainly during the manicheism of the Reagan years

when American triumphalism coexisted with heightened Cold War tensions.

The Yamato series can also be seen as a product of its time when Japan was one generation away from the war, an era in which technology and economic success seemed to promise a bright future, but also one in which many expressed anxiety over loss of basic Japanese traditions, including notions of community, sacrifice, and respect for the past. Unlike Star Wars and Star Trek, however, which take place in the science fiction continuum that Fredric Jameson describes as "the defamiliarization of the present " (my italics), the action of the Yamato films is predicated on coming to terms with a past event, the sinking of the battleship Yamato off Okinawa in the final days of the war, an incident that, in its iconic significance for the Japanese people, may be interpreted as an originary event, linked with the supreme originary event, the loss of the war. Furthermore this is an event which, in displaced form, is revisited constantly throughout the series, a dip into a quasi-repressed nightmarish past which, through the medium of animated science fiction, is reworked into a dream of success.

Interestingly, when the series was initially shown on Japanese television it garnered relatively low ratings, forcing the producer, Nishizaki Yoshinobu, (the actual creator of the series was Matsumoto Leiji and there were a number of different directors involved), to shorten the original 39 week broadcast to 26 weeks. It was with the opening of the first Yamato film, however, (essentially a compilation from the season's episodes), that the film and series began to become a pop culture phenomenon. In fact, the Yamato film series is widely credited with having inspired the beginnings of anime fandom, as fans from around the country came to camp out on the cinema's steps the night before the opening. [5] As the editorial staff of Animerica puts it, "the

first film] ignited a ‘Yamato craze’ which would go on to consume Japan-and eventually many other parts of the world-for the next ten years.” [6]

The four films comprising the 1970’s cinema series range over a *mise en scene* that varies from Earth to the Magellanic Clouds and beyond, even to the fourth dimension, but always calling attention to the WWII historical framework. [7] This is most obvious in the first film of the series *Battleship Yamato* (*Uchusenkan Yamato*), when an increasingly radioactive future earth is menaced by alien invaders known as the Gamilans. For somewhat enigmatic reasons, the government decides that the only way to save humanity is to revive the actual battleship Yamato from its watery grave off Okinawa. The sequence in which the Yamato is raised is clearly calculated to be both thrilling and deeply evocative of the actual historical event of the Yamato’s sinking. In a several minute sequence the film flashes back to the sailing of the original Yamato, the largest battleship ever created. As the film indicates, the battleship Yamato was freighted with far more iconic significance than an ordinary ship. Its name itself consciously refers to Japan, since “Yamato” was the ancient name for Japan and warriors were urged to have *Yamatodamashii* (Yamato spirit). Equally important, the ship bore the final hopes of warding off, or at least slowing the advance of invading Americans on the eve of the battle of Okinawa.

The film shows the 1945 Yamato setting sail, waved off by ordinary Japanese hopeful of its success, then offers a detailed depiction of its destruction. The film then cuts to the future, showing the ship’s literal resurrection. Through the astonished eyes of two young soldiers, we see the reconstituted Yamato breaking through mud and rock (the accretions of history), to the strains of moving music. The following scene shows its successful first flight, also accompanied by emotionally charged music. In

these few minutes the film encapsulates emotions ranging from despair to hope, the basic emotional trajectory of the entire series.

In an article on the Yamato phenomenon originally published in *Bungei Shunjuu*, the Japanese writer Yoshida Mitsuru sums up the first film in the following manner:

Space Cruiser Yamato fights alone as best it can against the swarms of enemy forces, its unassisted fight reminiscent of how the battleship Yamato accompanied by only 10 ships and with no air protections, fought a fatal battle and sank off Okinawa before the onslaught of 300 American warships and 1,200 American planes. But unlike the tragic demise of its prototype, the space cruiser Yamato successfully obtains the radioactivity-removing device with the help of Stasha, a mysterious beauty who lives on the planet Iscandall, destroys the Gamilus forces and returns safely to earth. [8]

The Yamato’s successful saving of the earth becomes the basic diegetic pattern for the series. Battles are fought, new worlds are discovered, the earth is menaced and then saved, always by the Yamato which miraculously survives destruction time after time. Indeed, throughout the spaceship’s interstellar journeys one tactic is particularly common: faced with a particularly menacing threat—one that seems impossible to escape—the crew consistently chooses, not simply to confront the menace, but to head straight into it, courting almost inevitable disaster but somehow emerging intact. At one point in *Space Battleship Yamato* (the first film of the series), for example, the crew of the Yamato is attempting to engage with an alien attack force, only to be stymied by the intensity of a star that blocks their passage. Rather than trying to go around the star and lose precious time, the crew suits up in special heat suits and skims the fiery surface, plunging through awesome solar flares that almost consume it

and finally just managing to escape. Later in the same film the Yamato is nearly destroyed by a metal-eating oil sea while being attacked by an enemy above the surface. Rather than emerge from the water, however, the Yamato submerges into the sea just long enough to start a chain reaction on the planet's surface that will annihilate the enemy. At the end of *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato* (*Saraba Uchusenkan Yamato*, 1978), the brave and handsome young captain Kodai Susumu, alone on the ship with his dead girlfriend, plunges the ship into a kind of death star disguised as a white comet in order to save the earth even at the cost of the Yamato and his own life. In *Forever Yamato* (*Yamato: Eien ni*, 1980), the fourth film of the series, the ship is forced to go into the center of the terrifying Black Nebula, where it is bombarded by both asteroids and enemy forces in a virtual visual and aural symphony of destruction. At the last moment, however, the crew discovers an exit space from the Nebula that places them above a planet that seems to be an exact twin of the Earth, 200 years in the future.

All these exciting sequences no doubt provide suspenseful pleasure for the series' target audience of children and adolescents, as the Yamato comes again and again within a hair's breadth of being annihilated. But the craft's constant plunges into danger followed by miraculous recovery can also be looked at psychoanalytically as plunges into the collective unconscious of the postwar Japanese citizenry, a form of "working through" the collective national trauma of defeat. By offering the audience the chance to vicariously approach the moment of Yamato's (Japan's) annihilation and then successfully escape what seems like inevitable destruction, the films can be seen as a form of cultural therapy in which loss is revisited in a fundamentally reassuring manner.

One of the most interesting examples of this "cultural therapy" may be seen in *Forever*

Yamato when the ship, after going through what is perhaps another dimension, discovers what seems to be a future earth. This is an earth however, in which according to its history, the Yamato never returned from its current mission and much of earth's culture was lost. The present day inhabitants of the future "earth" attempt to convince the Yamato's crew that they should simply stay in the future since history tells them that they will only be annihilated if they try to return. Just as the crew is about to despair, however, one of the crew begins to notice suspicious differences between our earth and the future earth (such as the fact that Rodin's "Thinker"'s hand is the wrong one). Realizing that this future earth is actually a simulacrum, a trap set up by the alien enemy, the Yamato escapes, battles its way back across the universe and, of course, saves the earth.

Even more than the first film, *Forever Yamato* addresses and plays on postwar Japanese anxieties, perhaps the most fundamental of which is that the successes of the postwar period were not sustainable. Like a dream within a dream the film's diegesis allows for an initial reworking of the defeat only to suggest that this reworking was itself a fake, (just as when we "wake" from a nightmare only to realize that the nightmare is still continuing) and that in "reality" the Yamato never does make it back to save the earth. At the last moment however, the film offers an alternative "true" reality in which the nightmare future is seen as only a simulacrum and the Yamato sails triumphantly on.

Of the postwar attitude toward the defeat, Yoshikuni Igarashi writes, "...the desire to return to the traumatic experiences of the Pacific War did not disappear with Japan's prosperity, since the narrative of progress posited its losses as the origin of the postwar Japanese society." He goes on to say that "the familiarity of the narrative simply transformed the eyewitness accounts into clichés" and that "the articulation of the war experience could

take place only in the form of repetition, trapped between the contradictory needs to remember and to forget the traumatic war experience.” [9]

I would suggest that the Space Battleship Yamato series goes beyond both remembering and forgetting. Through its medium (animation) and genre (futuristic science fiction) the series defamiliarizes the war experience, allowing not only a working through of the trauma of defeat (through innumerable repetitions of attack and destruction) but ultimately a reworking of the defeat, both through the final success of the Yamato in every encounter and, even more importantly, through the fetishization of the spaceship Yamato itself, not only a symbol of Japan’s final battles in WWII but also a symbol of the Japanese nation. Even more than the atomic bomb, which has become what Marilyn Ivy calls a metatropes for loss in contemporary Japan, [10] the Yamato, both the original and the animated versions, are tropes of the Japanese identity, initially configured as one of loss and destruction but, through the medium of animated fantasy, able to become a trope of renewal and hope. For in many ways this reworking is a positive one, as the Yamato is more or less transformed from the emblem of prewar Japanese militarism to a global (literally) emissary of peace and love to the universe. This universalization of the Yamato’s iconic significance is made abundantly clear throughout the series. The earth is now a single nation united against alien blue-skinned enemies (although the characters’ names are all Japanese and some, such as “Tokugawa” or “Okita” have historical significance) and the theme of love of humankind is constantly evoked, sometimes explicitly in the lyrics to various theme music, and in the second film Farewell Yamato’s subtitle Soldiers of Love (Ai no senshitachi).

If the atomic bomb was a symbol for Japanese of powerlessness and victimhood, as a result of an unexpected outside force the sinking of the

Yamato is a more culturally specific vision of defeat and despair. While some Japanese criticized the film on its initial appearance as potentially reviving militarism [11] the films project a very explicit message of universal love, not simply among the inhabitants of earth but involving at least some of earth’s alien enemies as well. Furthermore, the Yamato unlike the Enterprise in Star Trek is always in a reactive rather than proactive mode, defending the earth rather than seeking out adventures.

A more complex situation is limned in the 1990’s film and manga series Silent Service. This series, set in the contemporary era, features a nuclear submarine, originally under joint. U.S.-Japanese command and originally called the “Seabat.” In a surprise twist, however, the Japanese crew takes over the submarine and turns it into a rogue vessel, no longer under the command of any nation. Most of the series consists of the travels of the submarine and the attempts by the international community to find and seize it, constantly defeated by the plucky and resourceful Japanese captain who masterminded the takeover in the first place. Although unexpected, the takeover is actually presaged by a significant action taken by the Japanese commander early on in the story. Alone with the Seabat, he takes out his knife and carves a single word into the hull. The word (in Japanese) is “Yamato.”

Although the overall diegesis of Silent Service is less specifically evocative of history than was the Yamato series, history is still an important emotional catalyst behind the plot, as the above incident illustrates. This more recent series is a reworking of defeat and loss on a more proactive level. No longer in the therapeutically safe and dreamlike realm of the outer space of the future, Silent Service suggests a world of increasing international tension and rising Japanese nationalism, with the Americans clearly delineated and made to appear foolish.

Whether this contemporary reworking of loss and defeat is therapeutic or problematic remains open to question. Yoshida Mitsuru, himself a survivor of the Yamato's sinking, insists that, "Fortunately the space cruiser Yamato is decisively different from the battleship Yamato." [12] The same may not be said as easily of the Japanese appropriation of the Seabat, clearly a symbol of the desire for Japanese autonomy from America.

In his seafaring novel *Lord Jim*, Joseph Conrad creates a character (Jim), who cannot escape or even completely acknowledge a tragic mistake in his past, one that involved the lives of many innocent passengers on a pilgrim ship. In a famous and much critically debated scene, Jim's two mentors, Stein and Marlowe, discuss what to do with him. It is Stein who has the last word, telling Marlowe that Jim must "in the destructive element immerse," advice that I take to mean that Jim must confront his past and his own identity. In a sense Jim does accomplish this task although in a somewhat displaced and deeply romantic form, and one which ultimately involves the sacrifice of his life. Both the crew of the Yamato and the former SeaBat are also plunging into a destructive element, one composed of memory, history, loss and desire. That these "immersions" are also popular entertainment does not lessen their impact.

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[1] Lisa Yoneyama. *Hiroshima Traces: Time, Space and the Dialectics of Memory*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 27.

[2] Ibid, 27

[3] Ibid,, 28.

[4] I am indebted to two former students for my initial interest in the Yamato series. Karline McLain's paper "Remembering the Past, Recasting Identity" linked the sinking of the Yamato to the atomic bombings while Eric Carmen's presentation on the original battleship Yamato made me aware of how accurate was the anime version of the historical event and inspired me to explore reasons behind this obsessive attention to verisimilitude.

[5] See "All Aboard to the Land of Dreams," an interview with Ishiguro Noboru, one of the Yamato directors, for an account of the beginning of Yamato fandom. (*Animerica*, Vol. 3, No. 8, 1995), 7 and 9. Ironically, the Yamato series, renamed *Star Blazers* and edited for an American audience, is also considered to be the initial inspiration behind American anime fandom. See Robert Fenelon, "Talking about my *Star Blazers* Generation," (*Animerica*, Vol. 3, No.8, 1995), 8 and 10, and Walter Amos, "The *Star Blazers* You Didn't See" (*Animerica*, Vol. 3, No. 8, 1995), 10.

[6] *Animerica* Editorial Board, "Yamato Forever," (*Animerica*, Vol. 3, No. 8, 1995), 6.

[7] More so than either *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, space itself becomes a character in the Yamato series since much of the action takes place while the ship is on interstellar voyages (beautifully rendered in lush, dreamlike imager), rather than on planets. The fascination with the element of space may connect with the modern Japanese consciousness of the Pacific Ocean, which surrounds their island nation, and more specifically, with the crucial role the Pacific in both the successes and failures of World War II. For a discussion of the Pacific in Japanese science fiction see Thomas Schnellbacher, "Has the Empire Sunk Yet? -The Pacific in Japanese Science Fiction," in *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 29, Part 3, 2002,

382-396.

[8] Yoshida Mitsuru, "The 'Space Cruiser Yamato' Generation," (Japan Echo, Vol. VI. No. 1, 1979), 82.

[9] Yoshikuni Igarashi. *Bodies of Memory*. (Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 2000), 167.

[10] Marilyn Ivy. *Discourses of the Vanishing:*

Modernity, Phantasm, Japan. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 14.

[11] See the discussion by Yoshida Mitsuru, "The 'Space Cruiser Yamato' Generation," *op cit.*, 85-87.

[12] *Ibid.*, 86.