Moments Before: Exploring Our Cyclical Fears of the Past

Bruce Tsumura
Bruce.Tsumura@Colorado.EDU

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Moments Before:

Exploring Our Cyclical Fears of the Past

By Bruce Tetsuya Tsumura

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

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Examining Committee:

Jeanne Liotta, Thesis Advisor, Film Studies

Melinda Barlow, Honors Representative, Film Studies

Marcia Yonemoto, Professor, Department of History

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I. ABSTRACT

Despite living in a modern world, there remains a lingering fear that we will make the same mistakes as those who came before us; in politics, social rights, and most haunting of all, crimes of war. As a Japanese-American, with family in Japan still affected by the aftermath of WWII, and relatives who were wrongfully interned, this concept of a visual poem of sorts, has been a passion project of mine for many years. Moments Before illustrates the idea that the past is destined to repeat itself, unless drastic changes are made; not only for nuclear war, but for events of great trauma in general. This film is about the fear of that cyclical past realized, and shows the horrifying ‘moments before’ an impending attack, and the journey of one family’s experience of that time. My goal for Moments Before is to create a visual depiction for the resilience of the Japanese people, namely through the horrors of Hiroshima / Nagasaki, and US internment camps, although the latter aspect is not addressed directly, it is implied to be present. The title of the project also refers to a more general idea of the past, and anything predating the present day’s predicament. The film incorporates elements of documentary, such as archival footage of World War II nuclear test footage, rarely seen images of the survivors of the attacks on Japanese citizens, and a perspective from the United States. Much like one of this film’s key inspirations, The Thin Red Line (Malick 1998), Moments Before refrains from vilifying any one side, and aims to portray the horrors of war as just that: mistakes of the past. By taking a more objective approach to the historical accuracy, yet a subjective point of view for the emotional facet of the story, this film is able to blur the line between good and evil, necessity and overkill, positive prayer and blind devotion, and the varying levels of desperation to save oneself and loved ones in such a time of crisis. While the film serves as an allegory to the past in many ways,
and historical accuracy is important in the sense of building a believable future from elements of the past, *Moments Before* should still be contextualized in the bigger picture of a fictional narrative. It is not a premonition, but a cautionary tale; and a tribute to the pain that comes with death and rebirth, of both physical rebuilding, and the preservation of culture and heritage.

II. OVERVIEW

Being Japanese, my main cinematic interests as a child started with the original Japanese Godzilla films. As time went on, my taste began to shift towards more western filmmakers, such as Terrence Malick or George Lucas, but my love for Japanese cinema never stopped. Growing up as basically the only Asian-American kid in my elementary school, I faced many confusing aspects of my cultural identity; not necessarily a crisis, but at times, I often forgot I was “different”. My father’s side of the family came to America from Japan several generations ago, whereas my mother’s side still resides in Japan. This difference caused an interesting developmental environment in terms of religion; one side of the family being Christian, and the other being Buddhist. My mother was born in the Wakayama Prefecture in Japan, and still identifies as a Japanese citizen. Despite the hassle it causes when flying out of the States, she chooses to remain a citizen of Japan, and a resident-alien here in the U.S. because of her loyalty to the homeland. While I am a proud citizen of the U.S., I cannot help but admire my mother’s independence. In many ways, this film is autobiographical for me, and my family. Before grade school, my mom took me to Himawari, a class for Japanese children in Denver, to learn the language. I remember being able to read, write, and converse in Japanese, but over the years, as the inevitable influence and assimilation of western culture has shaped me, I have regrettably lost
majority of those skills. In writing this project, I wanted to create a dynamic that resembled the relationship between my me and my mother; less so in the dramatic confrontations the characters have, but more so in the subtleties of their interactions. In the film, the mother speaks to the son in Japanese, but the son responds in English. This was an intentional choice to show the disconnect between generations, and the difference the place of birth makes for immigrants.

Moments Before is just as much an allegory for the fears of war, as it is a love letter to my mom, dad, little sister, and my heritage. With all these factors of religion, culture, and the weight of the complex history between Japan and the U.S., I eventually developed the concept for Moments Before.

With this project, I wanted to tell a small scale story within a bigger picture scenario. While the film is specifically addressing the relationship of Japanese culture to western culture, it is also aiming to illustrate a human struggle; which anyone, anywhere could have experienced. The main point I wanted to drive home with Moments Before was that we will never learn from our mistakes by brushing them under the carpet and pretending they did not happen. It is by learning from, and acknowledging the past happenings, not dismissing or forgetting them, that we will improve and move forward. At the climax of the film (which I will discuss in greater detail in Part V), there is a shift in tone within the film, from immersive and realistic, to abstract and surreal. This sudden transition from reality to fantasy is a concept I have incorporated in a few of my films before. The abstract elements are meant to illustrate how religion and memory can help us, and it is important that the scene is not read completely literally. The film draws heavily from other allegorical films made as reflections of war, such as The Sacrifice (Tarkovsky 1986) and Howl’s Moving Castle (Miyazaki 2004). The element that sets Moments Before apart
from the rest of the World War II catalog of films, is the perspective. There are very few movies that focus on the perspective of Japanese / Japanese Americans during the 1940’s timeframe, but even more so, the story of the wrongfully interned, or the victims and survivors of the attacks, or the moments before a tragic event. Using archival footage in the scene, and by using real first hand account descriptions of the state of mind in these high intensity situations, I crafted the most honest piece about hope and resilience that I could.

III. HISTORY / BACKGROUND

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, on February 19, 1942, which allowed for people of Japanese heritage to be taken from their homes and kept in internment camps against their will, for fear of espionage within that demographic. Upwards of 120,000 Japanese were interned in the U.S. during this time. All this, despite the fact that a large majority were American born citizens (Japanese American National Museum). Unlike the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the internment of Japanese Americans is almost universally seen as a shame of America’s history. In 1988, President Reagan signed an apology act, which ended with the U.S. government paying over 1.6 billion dollars (over 3 billion in 2018’s economy) in reparations to 80,000 of the interned, and their families. Some of my own relatives were subjected to internment, but having little to no access to their first hand account records, I turned to other sources for intimate knowledge of the internment experience. John Okada’s first and only novel, *No-No Boy*, details the story of a Japanese American in the aftermath of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The book is unrelenting in its views and depictions of realism, most notably, the immediate change in treatment of the
Japanese by Americans, after Pearl Harbor. The book’s strength comes directly from the heart of Okada, and his genuineness can be felt throughout, “this is what you will feel, too, beneath the unanimity of brilliance: love. This is what sustains us, gives us hope and vision, ennobles our lives” (Okada). This is a tone and message I aimed to create with *Moments Before*.

On August 6, 1945, The United States military detonated a bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Many overlook the fact that these two crimes of war were not the only major devastations Japanese citizens faced. Preceding the two nuclear bombings, Japan was victim to firebombing campaigns, targeting 67 cities (Selden). On July 26, 1945, The United States gave Japan an ultimatum; surrender unconditionally, or face “prompt and utter destruction”. Japan ignored the demand, and the war continued until the nuclear bombs were used against Japan, killing 146,000 people in Hiroshima, and 80,000 in Nagasaki (Royde-Smith & Hughes). About half the deaths were instantaneous, but the other 50% of victims perished over the course of several days, from effect of burns, radiation, and sustained injuries. Most of the victims were innocent civilians: women, children, and families. Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945, effectively ending the war. But at what cost? The ethical and legal justifications of the use of nuclear weapons is still an object of controversy and debate today.

Until 1952, Japan was living under post-war American occupation, which censored any media discussion about the war. The nation was being reborn as a democratic, peaceful society. In tandem with its societal rebirth, Japan also entered a new era of cinema, with filmmakers like Akira Kurosawa, Kenji Mizoguchi, Yasujirō Ozu, and Ishirō Honda leading the way in the newly politicized climate. Despite the Japanese film industry being free to create what they wished, the wounds from the war were still fresh. The often politicized films of this era, such as *Gojira*
(Honda 1954), served as a primary influence for *Moments Before*, as I wanted to create a film with similar allegorical symbols, and have the story itself be a representation for a Japanese artist’s thoughts on the current political climate. The other primary influence for the film was Andrei Tarkovsky’s final film, *The Sacrifice*, which dissected the fears of war through religion and family dynamics. Having two different religious influences in my family, Buddhism and Christianity, the aspect of prayer has always played an interesting role in my life, and in turn, on this film. It was important that *Moments Before* depicted more than one perspective in terms of religion and culture.

**IV. LITERATURE REVIEW**

My inspirations for this film came from a wide variety of films and texts. *Gojira* and the Studio Ghibli film, *Howl’s Moving Castle*, are both important inspirations, because while they are entertaining genre pieces on the exterior, the films are really an allegory for the nation of Japan’s resilience through the war. *The Sacrifice* is also a huge inspiration to me in the plot, which establishes a nondescript setting in the near future, where the beginning of a third world war is imminent, and a man must make a sacrifice to save his family. In recent cinema, the Palme d’Or winning *Shoplifters* (Kore-ed 2018), became an inspiration to my vision, as it so accurately and beautifully illustrates the complex dynamics of a Japanese family. *The Atomic Cafe* (Rafferty 1982) served as an inspiration, due to its unique use of archival footage, and no singular narrator or voice carrying the story forward. A large part of my early stages in planning *Moments Before* incorporated the use of archival footage to lend a sense of grounded realism and authenticity to the film. Finally, tying all my inspirations together, is Terrence Malick’s *The Thin
Red Line, which shows a unique perspective in war films; that of a Japanese soldier, that not only humanizes the “enemy”, but shows humanity as a key factor in the process of healing from the scars of war.

After the U.S. censorship laws in Japan were lifted in 1952, Ishirō Honda finally began production on Gojira. However, the Japanese government was still worried about the foreign reception of their films during this era due to layered political statements: Gojira being the boldest of them all. It is important to watch the Japanese release since the American version intentionally leaves out subtitles for key moments, and even cuts 20 minutes from the film because of the political voice of Japanese artists at the time. When most people hear the word “Godzilla,” they picture the iconic monster from the land of the rising sun. Unfortunately, the name is often attributed to cheesy movies with men fighting in rubber monster suits; a surface level reading of a much deeper lore. I come from a proud Japanese family, and from the beginning, my parents made a point to introduce me to Japanese culture: mostly through films. Godzilla was my first exposure to cinema. At the time, I was not very aware of the effects that World War II had on the world, or my family. Without such context, the film’s unique tone and thematic takeaways might slip through the cracks. Gojira is a disaster movie on the surface but is a hauntingly beautiful metaphor for the people of Japan in a post-Hiroshima and Nagasaki world. Gojira is all about perspective; it allows the viewer to feel the post-war fears and anxieties of the ordinary people involved in these tragedies. The film was meant to be a cathartic release, something that could allow us to reimagine our history and learn from a tragic wartime experience. This was the first movie that made me realize that film had the potential to be more than just entertainment, but could be significant both as art and a social force. The film features
one of my favorite actors, Takashi Shimura, who plays a scientist, and one of the only characters in the film who opposes killing Godzilla, and instead wishes to study him and hopefully learn from its history. “Godzilla was baptized in the fire of the H-bomb and survived. What could kill it now?” This one poetic line sums up the entire film as a tragically beautiful statement about both the crimes of war, and the resilience of the Japanese people. A similar metaphorical statement that struck a chord with me, comes from Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston’s biographical novel, *Farewell to Manzanar*. When Jeanne’s father is being interrogated in one of the camps, he reverses the questions toward the officer, asking, “when your mother and your father are having a fight, do you want them to kill each other? Or do you just want them to stop fighting?” This powerful question describes the impossible situation that the Japanese Americans were put in, when asked about their loyalties. On the one hand, they are loyal to their heritage of Japan, but America, being their adopted home, is home nonetheless, making it just like choosing between parents in a fight, of course on a much more devastating scale.

*Gojira*’s practical effects, production design, and sound design remain to be some of the most influential work of the time. Godzilla’s iconic roar sounds like an organic creature; so many mixed emotions layered within, like that of a wolf’s angry howl, a whale’s lonely call, or a lion’s prideful bellow. The design of Godzilla itself is representative of the effects of war. Its skin was specially designed to resemble tumors and keloid scars like those of the atom bomb’s victims. Images of urban holocaust and overflowing hospitals hit close to home with the audiences, yet are undeniably brilliant. One of the more haunting images in the film shows a mother holding her three children, and as they hide, she tells them, “we’re going to join daddy! We’ll be where daddy is soon…” There is no score or musical cues; just a tragically realistic performance in the
middle of a powerful scene. I also aimed to create a sense of tension and realism with the juxtaposition between loud and extremely quiet scenes in *Moments Before*.

As political relationships healed, the tone of the franchise shifted, and Godzilla became Earth’s protector. Godzilla has since become a national icon of Japan, and one of the most recognizable characters in film history. *Gojira* holds sentimental value to me, as well as cinematic merit, being one of the movies that inspired me to pursue filmmaking. *Gojira* is a reminder that cinema can be more than just entertainment and that film can have an impact on the world, and it pridefully exclaims that art can be humanity’s most powerful tool for unification and communication. My greatest hope in undertaking this project was to create a piece of art that accomplished something similar to that of Honda’s masterpiece.

The last inspiration for *Moments Before* is the animated film, *Grave of the Fireflies* (Takahata 1988). Despite being animation, this film is to date, the most devastating and heartbreaking depiction of the events in World War II. Told from the perspective of a young Japanese boy, and his little sister, the film follows their struggle to survive after Japan’s surrender. The aspect I was inclined to use from *Grave of the Fireflies* was the sentimental relationship between brother and sister. My script already had the foundational bond of mother and son, but I wanted to include another tether to their family’s dynamic. *Grave of the Fireflies* hit me extremely hard because the age difference between the two siblings in the film is the same as the gap between my little sister and I. The fact that one sibling is wholly responsible for the wellbeing of the other, gave me the idea to have that close bond be present, but to physically separate the two. In *Moments Before*, the son lives with the mother, and the daughter lives with the father, in a different part of the country. It is purposely left ambiguous as to whether they are
separated for marital reasons, or because of the difficult geography and political restrictions of the future world they live in. The main point is that they are not together, and that is what drives much of the curiosity and hostility from the son’s character. I wanted to illustrate this deeply rooted fear that was tragically so common in the times before and after the internment and bombings; not knowing where your family members are, and even if they are alive or not. In an interview about the story’s perspective of *Grave of the Fireflies*, Takahata, the director, described the film’s perspective as from the brother’s point of view, and “even objective passages are filtered through his feelings.” With this in mind, I wrote and directed *Moments Before* to portray an objective story from an objective point of view, while still letting the emotions of the actors and the scene speak for themselves.

V. THE STORY

When an emergency radio broadcast warns of an impending nuclear attack, Kinko and Masami are forced to gather their most important belongings, all while seeing the parallels with the past. The story takes place in the near future, in an initially unspecified Western continent, later revealed to be a new nation called the United Colonies. The film follows a mother, Kinko, and her son, Masami, who both work in a large industrial greenhouse / plant nursery. Throughout the film, the audience learns that both Kinko’s unnamed husband, and their daughter Azumi, were separated from the greenhouse area, and have been living in a Northern part of the colonies. Kinko and Masami try to live a decent life together, but a simmering tension, presumably about the division of the family, creates a disconnect between the two.
Along with the paralleled narrative of this fictional time and the 1940s wartime, this story aims to explore the ever-changing identity of Japanese American citizens in this modern era of cultural appropriation and constant expectations to assimilate traditions and heritage, to a more Westernized standard. Kinko is of an older generation, and is a Japanese immigrant, whereas Masami, who was born in the West, has lost a significant part of his heritage in the inevitable cultural assimilation process. This is exemplified when Kinko asks Masami a question in Japanese, and Masami responds in English; a common occurrence for many second generation immigrant families.

The film opens with a quote, which is a rough translation from Tarkovsky’s *The Sacrifice*, in Russian, to English, “What is art? Like a declaration of love: the consciousness of our dependence on each other. A confession. An unconscious act that none the less reflects the true meaning of life - love and sacrifice.” This quote is meant to contextualize the film in a way that establishes the film itself as a statement, much like the characters in the film try to show through their love and sacrifice for one another. The film opens with a scene of an unnamed young Japanese girl, who after staring out her window, and hearing news of an impending attack, ventures outside in a trance like state. The sounds of war and pandemonium overwhelm the soundscape as the camera looks up toward a blurry sky. After this cold open, we see Kinko working in the greenhouse. At this point in the narrative, the cold open is meant to be unclear whether this is a dream, a flashback, a premonition, or a real happening simultaneously in a different location than Kinko. Hearing a similar emergency broadcast, Kinko walks around the facility to look for her son, Masami. She finds him distracted, scribbling on a small piece of paper, which he hides immediately after being approached. Masami asks about the wellbeing of
his sister, Azumi, as well as his father, to which Kinko has no answer. Kinko leaves for home, but stops by a temple first, to pray. The scene is edited in a way that shows ideological opposition between Masami and Kinko, which is resolved later on in the film, by having their second voice over scene edited in parallel fashion.

Throughout the film, there are narrative breaks, in which the story is interrupted by archival footage. These segments are always with purpose, and are meant to fill in the narrative gaps, only with visuals from the past. This brings back the idea that history is destined to repeat itself, which in this film, is a warning sign for both the characters, who are aware of such patterns, and the viewer, who hopefully has been noticing the similarities in unfolding events.

Karl Marx’s book, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, focuses on the individual’s role in history. “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx). This concept is fully realized in the scene where a third and final emergency broadcast is heard, this time warning of an immediate attack in their vicinity. Masami rushes home to meet Kinko, who has already begun packing essentials for the shelter. Masami packs nothing and attempts to burn the house down, in a last ditch effort to make his sacrifice mentioned earlier in his prayer. This radical mindset he is trapped in is explained partially by an archival segment in the film, explaining “nuclear blindness”, “all he can see is a mushroom cloud… blinded by the fear of it, deaf from the sound of it” (Rafferty 1982). The film takes a turn for the surreal when Masami steps into the garage, looking for a gas canister to spread the fire quicker. A mysterious, blood red light and low lying fog flood the space, as Kinko cautiously steps in after her son. All sounds of the outside world are drowned out by this void, as
Masami stands motionless, and hypnotized by the entrancing red light. Kinko, also fixated, manages to reach the door at the other end of the room, and before she opens it to see what is on the other side, the film cuts to black, followed by a montage of horrific images from World War II. The red light symbolizes the fears of the past. As the archival footage montage fades in, the film is tainted the same blood red color, gradually fading back to regular shades. The song that accompanies the scene is “Lacrimosa”, from my favorite film, *The Tree of Life* (Malick 2011). Lacrimosa means “weeping”, and in *The Tree of Life*, the musical piece accompanies a scene which depicts the birth of the universe. So, inversely, I used the song to show the opposite side, with the destruction of life. The final scene of the film sees Kinko and Masami, on an elevated rooftop overlooking a sunset, which again elicits the cyclical nature of the story. Together, they read a letter to Azumi, and it is ambiguous as to whether they survived because of Masami’s sacrifice, or if this is simply just a flashback to before the attack, and the characters are left in some type of purgatory.

VI. AESTHETICS

Visually speaking, I went into the production of this project with several specific techniques I wanted to implement: shallow focal lengths, long takes, selective use of slow motion. The shallow depth of field portrait shots, juxtaposed with deep staged, deep focus landscapes, display the contrast and relationship between man and nature, and show both the detailed environment, and the complex emotions on each character’s face. I also used very steady shots; either a tripod, or a steadicam, with the exception of part of the burning house long take scene. I wanted to create a dream-like space in many of the scenes, and like in Malick’s work, I
find a smooth camera is the best way to do that. I specifically chose to save slow motion for just
the prayer scenes, to give those moments a spiritual weight that the rest of the film’s often
turbulent mood did not require. There are several moments where the aspect ratio changes from
16:9 to 2.35:1 to 1:1. It was important for the flow of the film that the image did not just abruptly
cut from one to the other, as that would be jarring to the eye. Instead, I used gradual keyframe
animations to slowly expand or contract the black borders around the image, to create a
continuous flow of either regression to older format, or compressing into a more cinematic
composition. For color grading, I did not do anything too unnatural; just made each individual
shot look its very best. Lastly, my cinematographer and I went into the project wanting to tell the
story in longer takes, in order to showcase higher technical ability, make full use of our authentic
locations, and to immerse the audience in the time and space of every moment.

VII. MAKING THE FILM

Throughout the production, from casting, to location managing, to even my crew, it was
important to me that everyone involved be Japanese. I specified this requirement on all my
casting calls, and even sent out emails to my relatives and Japanese friends who may have
someone in mind for the role. Surprisingly, I had tons of auditions for the roles; which proved to
me that there are minority actors out there, who just are not being given the chance. All four
actors I decided on for the final cast, including the voice actor for the radio broadcasts, were
Japanese / Japanese Americans. It was fascinating to learn about their family histories, as this
subject matter hit very close to home for all of us; who either had relatives interned in the camps,
or had ancestors affected by the bombings. My lead actress was actually born in Nagasaki, and
that aspect really enhanced her performance, even drawing her to tears in one of the prayer scenes.

Location scouting was no different than my casting process. I used my family’s wide outreach in the Japanese community here in Denver, and was able to secure several commodities, through those connections; opportunities which would not have been possible without my heritage. My grandparents work closely with the Tri-State/Denver Buddhist Temple, who graciously allowed me to film in their beautiful outdoor shrine. My aunt and uncle are the founders of Tagawa Gardens in Parker, and they gave me full access to the entire facility to film in for one day. My parents also allowed me to film in their new house, which perfectly enough, was furnished with authentic Japanese decorations, such as our family crest, potted plants, and doll cases, all of which are visible in the background of the house scene. These places all had significance outside of being authentic for the film; but since the story is partially autobiographical, it was perfect to use places which I grew up in constantly.

Structurally, I want to keep the pacing slow, and create an immersive world, that feels real, much like in films like *Paterson* (Jarmusch 2016) or the previously mentioned *Shoplifters*. This story structure usually feels meandering, patient, until one singular, pivotal event or moment, changes the course of the characters’ lives. I love this style, because much like real life, our lives just continue on, with no plans of drama being inflicted onto our lives, until either a choice, a revelation, or being thrust into an unexpected situation suddenly has the potential to change everything.

Finally, perhaps the most difficult part of making the film, besides the actual filming, was dealing with the archival footage. I had hours of raw archival footage of World War II events.
Most of which were from Japan’s perspective, but much came from the United States as well. Editing down the approximately three hours of footage into 3 minutes was incredibly difficult, because it was hard to decide which clips were overly accusatory or brutal. My intent was not to put blame on any one side of the war, but to show an objective stand point in which there are no sides; no winners or losers. Around my 5th draft of the film, I had a much more explicit montage sequence with unbelievable footage of bomb victims, and their suffering. I made the choice to omit the worst images of that nature, because despite my goal being to shock the audience into self examination, I never seek to exploit the pain of others to a gratuitous stage.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The concluding thoughts within the film relate to Tarkovsky’s book, Sculpting in Time, in which he details the inner workings of both his production on The Sacrifice, and his own mind. He describes The Sacrifice, his final film, as ideas of “sacrifice, harmony, love for family, and faith.” He also firmly states that the director must allow room “for the audience to live in the film.” According to Tarkovsky, cinema is the only art form which allows the artist to create an unconditional reality (an emotional one), and not a system of signs, but an immediate art form, like music (Tarkovsky). The role of an objectivity in history versus the subjectivity in memory plays an imperative role in my film’s message. Like a filmmaker, a historian’s goal is not necessarily to solve the problems of the past, but to be facilitate a collective’s ability to reflect more deeply on the past’s complex nature. Once the human race, as a collective, is able to accept the past, not attempt to forget it, will we truly be able to see our repetitive habits of suffering, and visualize tangible ways to stop the cycle. The film is dedicated to my family.
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