CHAPTER SIX

VICTIMIZATION AND “RESPONSE-ABILITY”: REMEMBERING, REPRESENTING, AND WORKING THROUGH TRAUMA IN GRAVE OF THE FIREFLIES

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“Historical losses call for mourning—and possibly for critique and transformative sociopolitical practice” (LaCapra 2001: 68).

Responses to Takahata Isao’s animated film Hotaru no haka (Grave of the Fireflies, 1988 [1992]) vary greatly. Based on Nosaka Akiyuki’s 1967 short story of the same title, this anime recounts the tragic experience of two young Japanese siblings who survive the incendiary air raid that destroys their home and kills their parents toward the end of the War, but subsequently die of starvation. Many people—Japanese and non-Japanese, old and young, male and female—are brought to tears. And while some empathize with fourteen-year-old Seita, others blame him for the death of Setsuko, the four-year-old sister left in his charge. Still others experience an ambivalent combination of grief and censure. Reactions outside Japan include anger (which can itself be a form of grief reaction), claims that the film perpetuates the postwar Japanese master narrative of national victimhood and rhetorical questions about whether anime deserves to be taken seriously. Responses

1 As for the first reaction—grief—I have experienced it myself, and I have also observed it in many of the college and university students I have screened the film for both in the United States and Japan. In a filmed interview, Takahata comments on both the second and third reactions: empathizing with and blaming Seita. He expresses surprise that so many people he talked to experienced the former. Takahata assumed that more people would have been critical of Seita’s attitude and actions (Takahata 1998b). The fifth reaction—anger—was exhibited by a senior colleague during a work-in-progress talk I presented on the film. The same colleague went on to voice the seventh response as well. For a detailed discussion of the question, Why Anime?, see Susan J. Napier’s introductory chapter of the same title in Anime from Akira to Princess Mononoke: Experiencing Contemporary Japanese Animation. The sixth response mentioned above—that the film is best seen as a work of popular culture that is “allied with victim’s history”, “show[s] little inclination to delve into issues of [Japanese] guilt or responsibility”, and “evoke[s] an unproblematic response of heartfelt sympathy on
in Japan would include—and perhaps intermix—a sense of personalized and/or collective suffering, victimization and loss, anger at the wartime Japanese government, the United States government or both, discomfort concerning the adult acts of survival egoism depicted, a commitment to non-belligerence and a conviction that Japan must never again find itself in such an abject, defenseless position. Conspicuous in these varied and hybrid responses are affect (or a lack thereof), preoccupation with individual responsibility, the politics of public memory, 'victim consciousness', concerns with national and multinational accountability, localized ethical and moral failings, pacifism and muscular neonationalism. Such divergent and complex reactions to Takahata’s extraordinary anime raise critical questions about how concerned ‘outside observers’ approach, engage, understand and respond to artistic representations of specific experiences of historical trauma and victimization.³

Grave of the Fireflies is the creative product of two Japanese survivor-narrators who were subjected to indiscriminate firebombing attacks in their youth. Their distinctive traumatic experiences not only have significance to their respective literary and cinematic representations, but to the relationship of their audiences with them as well. In “Speaking the Language of Pain”, Kali Tal writes:

To posit a literature of trauma one must assume that the identity of the author as author is inseparable from the identity of author as trauma survivor. This means that the literature written about the trauma of others is qualitatively different from literature by trauma survivors (Tal 1991: 217).

the part of the viewers by focusing on innocent children devastated by war's destruction”—is presented in the aforementioned book by Napier (162–3).

³ A similar response has been expressed by some hibakusha (A-bomb survivors). In the “1995 Introduction” to Hiroshima nōto (Hiroshima Notes, 1965 [1981]), Ōe Kenzaburō writes: "In the A-bomb survivors' view, Japan’s rapid modernization, with its many distortions, led to Japan’s wars in Asia, which in turn led to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; thus they hold the Japanese state responsible for their sufferings. While they also criticize the United States for dropping the bombs, they have long sought compensation for their suffering from the Japanese government" (Ōe 1981: 9).

³ I strongly recommend watching the film in Japanese with subtitles. Takahata took great pains to find a highly talented five-year-old voice actress who spoke Kansai dialect (Shiraishi Ayano) to play the role of Setsuko (Takahata 1998b).