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Mnemonic Monsters Redux: Traumatic Signatures and the Afterlife of Image-Objects in Japanese Popular Culture

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Abstract

This paper explores the ways in which traumatic memories are shaped and transmitted by looking at two popular Japanese post-war media phenomena, Godzilla and Space Battleship Yamato. In opposition to the definition of trauma as that which escapes representation, I will argue with reference to the work of Aby Warburg that traces of trauma can energise certain forms of representation and provide them with a sometimes uncanny afterlife. Central to Warburg's conception of the afterlife of images is the notion of the 'pathos formula', a dynamic conception of the symbol as that which renders strong transient affects (fear, horror, revulsion) enduring and stable. Both Godzilla and Space Battleship Yamato feature motifs of the return of the repressed and are structured around repetitive climactic scenes: the attack of the monster(s) and the sinking of the battleship.

By reading these monstrous appearances as traumatic signatures and slips in time, my aim is to 1) develop an understanding of the agency of the past and its relationship to linear time as presented in the Japanese post-war popular culture staple of cycles of destruction and rebirth; and 2) to follow a particular theoretical trail of memory that has been more or less silenced by functionalist and structuralist anthropology. I shall also argue that it is this energetic charge that allows certain image-objects to cross boundaries between different genres (anime, manga and life-action), between high and low, and between the serious and the entertaining.

Keywords: *Battleship Yamato, Godzilla, monster, image-object, superhero*

I

“Du lebst und thust mir nichts”¹

Aby Warburg

What happens to the image that returns? This was the question that preoccupied me when I first started thinking about monsters and war experiences in Japan over 14 years ago. In a first attempt (Gygi 2008), I drew on Derrida’s hauntology and invoked Freudian notions of trauma and the uncanny to interpret *Gojira* (1954), a concern that Martin Jay has identified as a hallmark of the ‘uncanny nineties’ (2002). The 50th anniversary of the original Godzilla film in 2004 in many ways marked the apotheosis of this period. Part serious reevaluation of the legacy of the monster film, part culture industry-induced celebration, the flurry of popular and academic publications resulting from it focused predominantly on the ways in which Godzilla has prepared the ground for other Japanese popular culture exports. Whether the world-wide success of *kawaii* culture products such as Hello Kitty, the advent of which Yano calls “pink globalization” (2013); or Pokemon, the multi-platform export hit that stretches from card and video games to manga, anime and feature length films (Allison 2006), both trace their ancestry *qua* popular culture back to Godzilla. No longer a chiffre for an unspeakable memory (Gygi 2016), but an icon of kitsch and cheesiness (Kushner 2006: 48), Godzilla has sunk to the confines of children’s toy boxes.

How did this happen? One explanation often invoked is that the uncanniness of Godzilla was lost in translation, when added footage of Raymond Burr as American reporter and poor dubbing led to unintentional hilarity (Kalat 1997). But this does not account for the fact that the later Japanese films turned Godzilla into a “slapstick superhero for kids” (Tsutsui 2006: 4),

¹ “You are alive, yet you do not hurt me”

starting with the sequel to the original, 'Gojira no Gyakushū' (1955) and even more so in the 1962 'Kingu kongu tai Gojira'. The film historian Aaron Gerow (2006) argues that the shift in genre is partly due to a cross-over between monster films (*kaijū eiga*) and pro-wrestling, two popular culture phenomena highly salient in the post-war era.² The result of that cross-fertilization was the new genre of monster-wrestling (*kaijū-puroresu*) that led the way for many Japanese monster franchises, from 'Ultraman' in the 70s to the 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' in the 90s. In spite of the childish appeal of *kaijū-puroresu*, Gerow advises against simplistic assumptions about the target audience of these films. The assumption that they were made exclusively for child audiences allowed film critics to exclude them from serious consideration, feeding into the emerging distinctions between high and low in post-war cinema. This in turn allowed the films to subvert the sombre narrative of national nuclear threat and to revel in what Gerow calls "*childish spectatorship*":

As an embodiment of yukai [amusement], this excess of body movement expresses the pure pleasure of kinesis and physicality, celebrating a body unfettered by significance or seriousness, if not physical laws themselves. [...] The monster here is not the other, but rather the ideal, the body that is deliriously destructive both because it is powerful and because it escapes the confines of everyday physical definition. (2006: 71)

The aesthetics shared by monster films and pro-wrestling after 1955 can be summed up with the term *abare*, "to go on a rampage". The scenes of destruction are lifted from the dark and heavy context and are rendered as "*ecstatic ruination*" (2006: 72). The move away from cinematic realism is expressed in the move from black and white to color, from low- to high-key lighting, from lower angle shots to a more leveled point of

² See Igarashi 2000 on pro-wrestling in postwar Japan.

view, rendering the monster battle less of an incident happening to the viewer than turning it into a spectacle for consumption. Like pro-wrestling, the monster matches invite the spectator to take sides, and Godzilla turns increasingly into a character the audience can identify with; a protector of the realm who is invoked against new threats by other, increasingly comical monsters. In other words, the threatening monster who returns is transformed into a still monstrous yet lovable character that remains.

What happens to the image that remains? Complementary but not identical to the problem of the return of images, this question opens up a different path to the notion of haunting, one that does not lead through the well established path of psychoanalysis and philosophical deconstruction, but a more subterranean route that allows us to address the underlying commonality between that which returns and that which remains: a concern with the vertiginous nature of time. In what follows I draw on the neglected works of Victorian anthropologist E. B. Tylor and the self-professed “psycho-historian” Aby Warburg to sketch an alternative path that leads to ways of understanding the past and its agency in the present.

II

When E. B. Tylor (1832-1917) undertook the formidable task of devising a “science of culture” that would address both the universal laws of evolution and the discreet stages this evolution takes, he came across an interesting paradox. Different cultures were at different stages of the same development, but old elements of earlier stages did not entirely vanish; they remained as “survivals”, receding into the background of a new age. These survivals allow the ethnographer access to the past: they are a royal path to the depth of time, one that surprisingly often starts in the toy box. In his magnum opus “Primitive Culture”, first

published in 1871, he writes:

If the games of children and of grown-up people be examined with an eye to ethnological lessons to be gained from them, one of the first thing that strikes us is how many of them are only sportive imitations of the serious business of life." (1873: 72) "The serious business of ancient society may be seen to sink into the sport of later generations, and its serious belief to linger on in nursery folklore, while superseded habits of old-world life may be modified into new-world forms still powerful for good and evil. (1873: 16)

Tylor rejects the then still popular doctrine of degeneration as "theological". Instead he suggests that while humanity progresses towards civilization, survivals "sink" from addressing serious existential issues to the frivolous level of children's play. As the savage is characterized as representing the "*childhood of the human race*" (1873: 284), the development of the child is portrayed as reproducing on an individual level the evolution of mankind. This is the familiar argument of the evolutionists, and although Tylor is fully invested in the idea of the march of progress, the presence of survivals as sunken and mostly inert pieces of the past in the present unsettles the simple stage model of evolution. Furthermore, survivals may be a mere shadow of a former life world, but they have the potential to turn into "revivals" and regain something of their former saliency. Tylor frequently refers to "modern" spiritism as a revival of old animistic beliefs, but he is carefully making a distinction between revival and degeneracy (or regression). Comparing "savage", "barbaric" and "civilized" spiritualism he muses:

Do the Red Indian medicine man, the Tatar necromancer, the Highland ghost-seer, and the Boston medium, share the possession of belief and knowledge of the highest truth and import, which, nevertheless, the great intellectual movement of the last two centuries has simply thrown aside as worthless? Is what we are habitually boasting of and calling new enlightenment, then, in

fact a decay of knowledge? If so, this is a truly remarkable case of degeneration, and the savages who some ethnographers look on as degenerate from a higher civilization, may turn on their accusers and charge them with having fallen from the high level of savage knowledge. (1873: 156)

What Tylor seems to imply here is that degeneration is a poor argument because it can be turned on its head in an almost relativistic manner. After suggesting this possibility, however, he immediately launches into the praise of “fools”, “stupidity and unpractical conservatism” (ibdn) that have made possible the study of culture via survivals/revivals. But the question ‘What drives revivals?’ remains curiously unexplored. Tylor is careful to avoid disavowing claims to the “scientific truth” of spiritism, preferring rather to label it a “*devotion to the no longer significant*”,³ precisely because to concentrate on the “*things worn out, worthless, frivolous*” (ibdn) allows the ethnographer to remain objective and independent from the “*partisan diatribes on the questions of the day*” (1873: 158). Instead, “[t]he ethnographer’s course, again, should be like that of the anatomist who carries on his studies if possible rather on dead than on living subjects; vivisection is nervous work, and the humane investigator hates inflicting needless pain” (ibdn).

Nervous work indeed. The distinction between dead and living subjects is telling. He prefers the survival over the revival because the survival allows him to claim an objectivity unsullied by contemporary debates. Tylor is aware that the evolutionary stages are merely a blunt instrument to impose order along a timeline. The present is not made up of things that hark back to a universalized past: its surface is uneven, it contains a host of objects, manners, customs and beliefs that have a heterogenous

³ Possibly in reference to the German formulation “Andacht zum Unbedeutenden”, the phrase with which the historian Sulpiz Boisserée condescendingly characterized the Grimm brothers philological work in a letter to Goethe in 1815 (see Kany 1987: 234f).

time signature, that protrude into the present from a particular past that through them becomes co-temporaneous.⁴ In other words, the notion of the survival unbalances the unilinear arrow of time. On one hand, it allows the researcher access to the depth of multiple pasts and earlier stages of development: *“Survival in culture, placing all along the course of advancing civilization way-marks full of meaning to those who can decipher their signs”* (p. 21). On the other hand it allows the past to reach and shape the present: *“[survival]even now sets up in our midst primeval monuments of barbaric thought and life”*(ibdn). This anachronistic presence turns the civilized into mere (one is tempted to say unconscious) *“transmitters and modifiers of the results of long past ages”* (p. 17).

III

While Tylor was writing about the transmission of the past, eschewing the nervous work that would connect it to the present, the German art historian Aby Warburg (1866-1929) faced a similar problem of ‘enervation’ when describing the ways Florentine painters of the Renaissance drew on antiquity to depict movement. As the French art historian Didi-Huberman (2002) has argued, Tylor and Warburg, in spite of their different academic backgrounds, share a concern with what Warburg calls the “afterlife” [“Nachleben” in German] of images.⁵ Tylor describes modern man as “transmitter” of the past; in his last seminar, Warburg describes Burkhardt and Nietzsche as seismographs, who receive “mnestic waves” [mnemische Wellen] from the past. Both Tylor and Warburg have travelled

⁴ See also Johannes Fabian’s critique of anthropological notions of time and “coevalness”. He however dismisses Tylor as the propagator of an “evolutionist naturalization of time”(1983: 16), which clearly does not take into account Tylor’s doctrine of survival and the implied consequences.

⁵ Warburg is likely to have read Tylor, but his interest in the enduring presence and influence of images predates his encounter with “Primitive Culture”.

to the New World, an adventure that has left deep traces in both their works. Tylor –perhaps somewhat unfairly known as an armchair anthropologist– published the journal from his journey through Mexico under the title “Anahuac” (1861); Warburg, under the treatment of psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger in Kreuzlingen, wrote a “Lecture on Serpent Ritual” drawing on his notes from a journey through New Mexico he undertook in 1896.⁶ Both scholars were interested in seemingly trivial details – Tylor in games, decorations and sayings; Warburg in the details [Beiwerk] that create movement: flowing hair and clothes. As such they can both be understood as belonging to the “trace paradigm” that Carlo Ginzburg famously identified as the methodological programme uniting such disparate figures as art historian Morelli, Freud and Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes (Ginzburg 1980). However, while Tylor dismisses his survivals as trivial (unless they are reactivated, in which case he thinks it wiser to suspend judgement), Warburg’s notion of the afterlife of antiquity is more keenly attuned to the uncanny life of the past in the present. Originally looking for the origin of movement in the visual art of the Florentinian Quattrocento, Warburg suggests that Botticelli was not simply looking to antique friezes for a repertory of figures, but for the expressive formula that captured life and movement. From this initial concern he develops the prolegomena for a science of human expression [Ausdruckskunde] that culminates in the unfinished “Image-Atlas Mnemosyne”, an attempt to understand the afterlife and revival of antiquity as “[t]he de-demonisation process [...], which one could call the attempt of spiritualizing and internalizing previously stamped expressive values”⁷ for the representation of life in motion” (Warburg 1929 [2012]). Images are both containers and transformers of energy [Energiekonserven], they give shape to existential affects –from “helpless depression [Versunkenheit]

⁶ Published as “Ritual of the Snake: A Travelogue” (2011).

⁷ “Versuch der Einverseelung vorgeprägter Ausdruckswerte”

to murderous cannibalism”— and so achieve a distance between the object of depiction. The transformation however never quite completely delimits the power so contained. The tension between “phobic energies” and the form-giving will of the artist is still evident in the movement that is confined in the figure. Warburg calls such images *Pathosformeln* (pathos formulae), in his own words “*superlatives of passionately moving gestural expressions from antiquity*”.⁸ The term in itself denotes the contradicting forces at work: the *pathos*, the transitory moment of strong affect, and the *formula*, the form through which the affect becomes enduring.⁹ Didi-Huberman eloquently describes the pathos formula with reference to what Warburg calls the “dialectics of the monster”:

To Warburg’s mind, this is the fundamental and ‘uncanny duality’ [unheimliche Doppelheit] of all cultural facts: the logic they give rise to allows the chaos they combat to overflow; the beauty they invent lets the horror they suppress burst through; the freedom they promote leaves the constraining drives they try to break alive.¹⁰ (Didi-Huberman 2002: 286)

This is the reason why Warburg calls the Mnemosyne-Project not an inquiry into cultural memory, but a “ghost story for adults” (quoted in Michaud 1998: 260). The static image of antiquity, famously characterised by Winckelmann more than hundred years earlier as “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur”, is rendered dynamic by Warburg’s attention to convulsive gestures and depictions of violence. Annoyed and disillusioned by what

⁸ “Superlative leidenschaftlich bewegter Gebaerdensprache der Antike”, Warburg in a letter to Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, quoted in Kany (1987: 169).

⁹ See Salvatore Settis for a less stunted account (1997).

¹⁰ “Telle fut, aux yeux de Warburg, la fondamentale et ‘inquietante dualite’ (unheimliche Doppelheit) de tous les faits de culture: la logique qu’ils font surgir laisse aussi deborder le chaos qu’ils combattent; la beaute qu’ils inventent laisse aussi poindre l’horreur qu’ils refoulent; la liberte qu’ils promeuvent laisse vivantes les contraintes pulsionnelles qu’ils tentent de briser” (Didi-Huberman 2002: 286)

he called “aesthetizing art history” (quoted in Gombrich 1981: 118), Warburg later writes in the introduction to the *Mnemosyne-Atlas*:

May those who want take satisfaction in the flora of the pleasantly smelling and most beautiful plants, a plant physiology of the circulation and the rising of the sap cannot be developed from it, for such is only disclosed to those who examine the life in the subterranean root system.¹¹

With this proto-rhizomatic formulation, Warburg enables a notion of time that allows the endurance of the past as a form-giving agency and that takes seriously the “life” that survives. “Du lebst und thust mir nichts” [You are alive and you don’t hurt me]:¹² this motto for a planned but never achieved “Fragments for a Pragmatic Science of Expression” illustrates the distancing space-creating act of figuration and the forces it contains. To depict the monster is to de-toxify it [Entgiftung] without rendering it unable to affect us strongly. Unlike Tylor, who speaks of the preferable vivisection of dead artifacts and who ultimately emphasises the difference between primitive culture and civilization –in spite of having put them on the same trajectory– Warburg is much more aware of the frailty of civilisation, through both his experience of the First World War and his post-war mental illness. While Tylor is strongly invested in fortifying the distinctions his own theory of revivals undermines –something we can understand in Warburgian terms as “Abwehrgeste”, a gesture of defense– Warburg’s experiences among the Hopi in New Mexico and his later visitation of this material suggests that he understood the

¹¹ Mag wer will sich mit einer Flora der wohlriechenden und schönsten Pflanzen begnügen, eine Pflanzenphysiologie des Kreislaufs und des Säftesteigens kann sich aus ihr nicht entwickeln, denn diese erschließt sich nur dem, der das Leben im unterirdischen Wurzelwerk untersucht.”

¹² In light of the dialectical notion of the image a more accurate translation would be “You are alive and yet don’t hurt me” (see also Fehrenbach 2010: 124).

Kachina dances and the serpent ritual as attempts to master the forces of nature, both the external threat to existence and the internal threat that affect poses to the ego. In a revealing letter drafted at the psychiatric sanatorium Bellevue in Kreuzlingen, Warburg adamantly states that the lecture on the serpent ritual is by no means to be taken as a presentation of “the ‘results’ of a supposedly superior knowledge or science, but rather as the desperate confessions of someone seeking redemption [...]” He continues “I also do not want the slightest trace of blasphemous pseudoscience to be found in this comparative search for the eternally constant Indianness within the helpless human soul” (quoted in Michaud 2004: 296).

The diasynchronicity of development counterbalances the synchronicity of the layers of the psyche. The survival, like the pathos formula, allows access to psychic time that unbalances the linear arrow of progress. As Michaud has pointed out (1998), to read ‘expression’ [Ausdruck] as expression of individuality would be a mistake: Mnemosyne in a way illustrates expressivity without subjectivity or before expressivity, a notion of affect that anticipates many of the theoretical tenets of contemporary affect theory. The different place that Tylor and Warburg accord to individual agency is symptomatic for the way they understand themselves vis-à-vis their subject matter: while anthropology has become known in his day as “Mr. Tylor’s science”, putting a rational subject in control, Warburg’s delineation of a programme remains, in his own words, “a science without a name”.¹³

IV

Both the image-object¹⁴ that returns and the image-object that remains, then, are ways of understanding the time signature of

¹³ Quoted in Risthaus 2016: 43.

¹⁴ I use “image-object” rather than just “image” to emphasise the independent existence of the image, both in a material and medial sense.

the monster as surviving affective charge. But while the notion of repressed trauma turns the film monster appearing on the screen into another screen on to which we project our fears, the notion of afterlife or survival allows for an understanding of the monster as truly dialectical figure that always exists in excess of signification, both curse and the cure. Godzilla keeps returning, but as he does so his location shifts: a survival of an earlier affective charge, he sinks to the children's toy box and becomes a friendly presence, a domesticated threat. It seems that with each return the image-object or pathos formula of Godzilla is 'bound' into a new context that however never quite manages to erase the threat, only to displace it, from the big screen to the small screen, from the darkness of the horror film to the brightly lit children's playroom.

Attempts to return Godzilla to its serious origins are futile, unless they reestablish a connection to the power that has shaped the monster as a container of itself. The universally panned 1998 Hollywood attempt at introducing Godzilla to New York¹⁵ failed precisely because Godzilla was essentially depicted as a velociraptor, a quick-legged dinosaur popularized by the film "Jurassic Park", that tries to hide in the streets of New York. Godzilla's awakening in this hackneyed version is blamed on the French and their nuclear tests in French Polynesia. The 2014 "Godzilla" reboot by Legendary Pictures restored the connection of the hybrid nature of Godzilla's power to both force of nature and as nuclear creation, albeit with a twist: instead of being awakened and transformed by US nuclear tests as was the original 1954 *Gojira*, the 2014 film contends that Godzilla appears spontaneously and that US nuclear tests were actually attempts by the US military to destroy the threat. As Tsutsui argues, this reimagining of the *raison-d'être* of the monster paves the way for the complete Americanization of Godzilla (Tsutsui 2014), expressed in the news headline briefly visible at the end

¹⁵ TriStar produced and directed by Roland Emmerich.

of the film “King of the Monsters – Savior of Our City” (the city being San Francisco).

The affective charge the monster bears is given symbolic expression in the films by referring to radiation that the monster both contains and emits. It is literally that which gives the monster their ‘supernatural’ energy and also that which makes them transcend the merely biological. The monster renders ambiguous the boundary between life and death because it inverts the natural order of things: it is paradoxically the forces of death that animate the monster. This becomes obvious when we look at the popular anatomical diagrams of *kaijū* by “monster professor” Ōtomo Shōji, that delighted children in the late 60s when they appeared as ‘*Kaijū Zūkan*’ (Monster Field Guide).¹⁶ The inner workings of these monsters shows them to be embodiments of pure belligerence. All their organs are weapons and bear no relation to biological survival or reproduction. Procreation would be too much on the side of life. Even in the 1967 “Son of Godzilla” the relationship between “Minira” and Godzilla is never made clear in spite of the English title. In the 2014 American version of Godzilla on the other hand, his “motivation” is explained in purely evolutionary and therefore biological terms: Godzilla is not a heroic defender of humanity, but genetically programmed to kill the MUTOs (an acronym for Massive Unidentified Terrestrial Organism). The hubris-nemesis scheme is thus replaced by genetic determinism.

Contrary to this American appropriation, the 2016 Japanese reboot of the series, *Shin-Gojira* (New Godzilla)¹⁷ returns to a more mysterious monster by having Gojira mutate and assume different forms and abilities during the movie, caused by the creature’s consumption of radioactive waste in Tokyo bay. When announcing the film, Anno stated that the “shin” (written in

¹⁶ Crown prince Naruhito is said to have spent his very first allowance to procure this oeuvre.

¹⁷ Produced by Toho studios and directed by Anno Hideaki and Higuchi Shinji

katakana) could be interpreted as new (新), true (真) or God (神) (Sponichi 2015, 9. 23¹⁸). This purposefully ambiguous designation has fuelled fan speculation for over a year before the release of the film. Is 'New Gojira' a nod to the idea of a reboot of the series, in a film that for the first time in the history of the series does not refer to what happened in the original film? Is 'True Godzilla' a subtly cast aspersion on the American Godzilla? Is 'God Godzilla' a return to the vengeful souls of the fallen soldiers that were said to manifest in the original 1954 Gojira? The main tension of the film is between the almost comically inept reaction of the Japanese government and the quick evolution of Godzilla. Interestingly, the scenes of destruction –a wave of boats caught in Gojira's approach, the wake of destruction in his trail– bear a strong resemblance to the destruction left by the tsunami after the earthquake on March 11, 2011. This impression is reinforced to the radioactivity that remains after Godzilla's rampage, the scenes at shelters and the way that one of the cabinet's first reactions is to change from their black business suits into blue 'emergency' suits. But there are two very short, almost subliminal images that interrupt the flow of the narrative and the evocation of recent images of destruction. An image of the gutted atomic dome in Hiroshima followed by the one-legged tori of Sannō shrine in Nagasaki, both immediately recognisable due to their iconic status. It is these flash images, seemingly out of context, that recharge the original connection of Godzilla to the nuclear bombs, in spite of the narrative's amnesia regarding earlier Godzilla outings. It is as if even in a self-contained reboot the original connection to the nuclear bomb is breaking through in the form of traumatic flashbacks from outside of the film. Tellingly, it is not Godzilla's radiation that triggers the flashbacks, but the threat of a third thermonuclear bomb dropped this time on Tokyo by the Americans, who will stop at nothing to contain

¹⁸ <http://www.sponichi.co.jp/entertainment/news/2015/09/23/kiji/K20150923011187800.html>

the threat – echoing the morally dubious but in the U.S. widely accepted argument that the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki saved the lives of thousands of soldiers. The New Gojira shares with the old Gojira the displacement of agency and the object of fear, but the earlier denouements are forgotten: it is as if they never happened. Only the monster that has become unstuck in time remains and returns – an old haunting in a new context.

V

That which survives need not have been alive in the first place. Godzilla starts out as an almost supernatural personification of wrath, but is quickly turned into a more manageable and familiar monster. But there are other instances of afterlife that are animated by different forces than the biological. If Godzilla is the live monster that returns, then the battleship Yamato is the inanimate thing whose remains return, the technological sublime in a ghostly form. The largest battleship to ever roam the seas, the Yamato was the crowning achievement of the Japanese Navy. Built from 1937 to 41 with the intention to dwarf the American North Carolina-class battleships, it was 263 meters long, displaced over 71,000 tons when fully loaded, and sported a crew of 2750 sailors (Nagasawa 2007: 82). (See Fig.1) It was the flagship of the Japanese navy until 1943, when it was replaced as such by its slightly smaller sister ship *Musashi*. Although hailed as a symbol of naval power and might, the Yamato was already a military anachronism when it was launched in 1940. Aircraft carriers and fighter plane dominated the battles in the Pacific and huge battleships were no match for air-to-water attacks. Named after the historical heartland of Japanese civilization, the Yamato only engaged the American navy once, on October 25 , 1944, in the Battle of Samar; otherwise she was used as a transport ship, sometimes even derided as “Hotel Yamato” by the crews of



Fig. 1: Poster of the anime “Space Battleship Yamato”

battle-tested destroyers.¹⁹ On the 7th of April 1945 the Yamato was sent on a suicide mission (Operation Ten-go) to beach herself at Hagushi and fight as a shore battery until destroyed (Yoshida and Hara 2005: 260). Intercepted by American fighters, she sank after being hit by more than 20 bombs and torpedoes. Only 269 crewmen survived (Yoshida 1972: 176).

But the Yamato was far from sunk in popular imagination. In many ways, the secrecy surrounding its construction and the suppression by the GHQ of the memoirs of one of the few survivors, Yoshida Mitsuru's "Requiem for Battleship Yamato", created ideal conditions for its mythologization. In 1974 she was resurrected in one of the pioneering works of anime: *Uchū Senkan Yamato* (宇宙戦艦ヤマト)²⁰ by Nishizaki Yoshinobu and Matsumoto Leiji. The narrative is set in the year 2199. After an alien race, the Gamilas, destroyed the earth's surface with nuclear weapons, the surviving humans seek shelter in underground cities. A secret message from the mysterious planet of Iskandar contains the promise of a remedy against radioactive contagion and plans to build a ship that can travel faster than the speed of light. During a rescue mission, the wreck of the battleship Yamato is found at the bottom of the now dried-up ocean and is rebuilt as a space battleship in order to travel to Iskandar and retrieve the "cosmo cleaner" and save the earth from radiation. Equipped with the ultimate weapon, the wave-motion gun, the Yamato sets out (again) on a perilous journey across the galaxy and in the end succeeds in saving humanity and destroying Gamilon, the home planet of the Gamilas.

Although the storylines are very different, both *Godzilla* and

¹⁹ The Yamato boasted un-military luxuries such as air-conditioning and individual beds instead of hammocks for crewmen (NHK Shuzai-han 2013: 42-44). It is also possible that it is an allusion to the Yamato hotel chain run by the South Manchurian Railway as colonial business.

²⁰ "Space Battleship Yamato", the "Yamato" is written in *katakana* rather than in *kanji* suggesting a certain distance and the possibility for a meta-reading. The series was originally broadcast in the U.S. as "Starblazers".

Space Battleship Yamato draw their energy from a traumatic memory of war-time loss. Both are animated by the deadly force that led to the Japanese surrender: Godzilla is woken by the nuclear blast and destroys Tokyo with his nuclear breath; the space battleship Yamato's faster-than-light engine is also its main weapon, the wave-motion gun. The Janus-face of nuclear energy that is conspicuous in *Tetsuwan Atomu* (Gygi 2016), is implicitly elaborated and augmented in *Space Battleship Yamato* by adding the dramatic plot element that the Yamato is defenseless for a few moments before the wave motion gun is fired. While Godzilla returns to Japan again and again, the re-imagined Yamato is trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of sinkings and resurrections. Although each story line starts with the "resurrection" of the Yamato found on the ocean floor, the endings are more varied: self-sacrifice and survival are two possibilities leading to alternative universes. But no matter which narrative arc, the visual and emotional core is the rising of the ship itself: sometimes breaking through a cover of earth (the original anime series), sometimes from under water (さらば宇宙戦艦ヤマト 愛の戦士たち *Farewell to Space Battleship Yamato* 1978), sometimes from under ice (宇宙戦艦ヤマト 復活編 *Space Battleship Yamato: Resurrection* 2009), usually accompanied by Miyagawa Hiroshi's iconic theme tune. In an interview with Tim Eldred in 2010, co-creator Matsumoto Leiji remembers that he asked the composer to write something akin to the 2nd movement of Beethoven's third symphony.²¹ What he does not mention is that this movement bears the title "funeral march/adagio assai". Although the musical result is quite different, the first anime series started with a somber a capella male choir singing the opening lines "*saraba chikyu yo*" (Goodbye Earth). In the more recent films the 'resurrection motif'

²¹ <http://ourstarblazers.com/vault/39/> accessed May 2016. In the interview, Matsumoto also confirms that the Shinsengumi was an important visual inspiration for *Space Battleship Yamato*.

is followed by the same somber yet hopeful march.²² Scenes of the sinking of Yamato are dramatically extended to last several minutes and usually mark the end of the film/episode. This repetition of death/resurrection is akin to the Freudian “fort/da”, the compulsive repetition of which allows the child to cope with the threat of the absence of the mother by pretending that the child is in control. If Godzilla returns as the suppressed war memory, then the compulsive repetition dramatized in Yamato is the signature of the trauma of war defeat. The undead of war are no longer soldiers or civilians slaughtered in meaningless battle, but animated machines of war. In the films, the Yamato is often treated and addressed as a character in its own right, a character furthermore whose history extends all the way back to the original battleship Yamato. The blurb on the poster for the Final Yamato (1983) reads “*Goodbye Yamato, Rest in peace, you won’t be woken up again*”²³ and in the last minutes of the feature length anime, Captain Okita, who pilots the ship on its last suicide mission into a frontal collision with the enemy, addresses the ship with the following words: “*You have been a faithful companion for a long time, Yamato. I wanted to bring you back to the ocean floor near Bogasaki*”,²⁴ but it seems this is no longer possible. Forgive me!”²⁵ The Yamato here not only appears as an animate being, but also as an entity not belonging to Japan or the future home of humanity, but to the bottom of the sea. In a sense this is an admission that the Yamato is a machine ghost that was reawakened to fight another day.

A further indication of the traumatic signature of the Yamato

²² Incidentally also a favorite of the various Self-defense force marching bands, if youtube is to be believed.

²³ さらばヤマトよ、今静かに眠れ、一度と起こされることなく

²⁴ The place where the Yamato sank and where the remains were discovered in 1984 under 340meters of water.

²⁵ 「長い間ご苦勞だったな、ヤマト。お前をあの坊ヶ崎の海底につれ返してやりた
いが、そうもいかんようだ。許してくれよ」 宇宙戦艦ヤマト完結編 Final Yamato
1983

is the way the core scenes of rising and sinking have thrown the narrative off its linear timeline. As Ashbaugh observes:

[i]n the many Yamato television and movie sequels, the ship and/or crew are often destroyed or killed, only to achieve victory in the end. However, the next time a television show or movie with Yamato is released, nothing is wrong with the ship and oftentimes dead characters return from the grave to fight anew. (Ashbaugh 2010: 340)

This does not only apply to the sequels but also to the original time line that reappears in different guises, as live-action film in 2010 (Toho) and as rebooted anime series in 2012 (*Space Battleship Yamato 2199*). Posadas explains this with reference to the history of the anime's production that in many ways anticipated fan-participation. When the Yamato was destroyed at the end of "Farewell, Yamato" it was the outcry of fans that lead to an undoing of the self-sacrifice of the Yamato (Posadas 2014: 335). He argues that SF anime has a distinct relationship to the world it creates, that is predetermined by a large science fiction meta-text rather than a narrowly conceived notion of historical memory. Along with Otsuka Eiji, he contends that:

Audiences of anime attempt to apprehend the totality of a narrative world through their instantiation in a multiplicity of narrative fragments across media forms. Each episode, each text does not exist in isolation as a coherent narrative in itself, but instead functions as an iteration that offers an access point to a larger grand-narrative that [Otsuka] calls 'a worldview' [sekaikan] that exists in the background, unified through the recognition of consistent character images and designs, thus shifting the emphasis of consumption from narratives to worlds, with specific characters as nodal points for apprehending these expansive and immersive fictional universes. (2014: 333)

I would however argue that while there are themes in Space

Battleship Yamato that clearly belong to the much longer tradition of science fiction both in Japan and abroad (space exploration, the unknown, encounters with foreign cultures, themes which Posadas subsumes under the topic of the “colonial gaze”), the particular emotional charge the Yamato has is derived from the displacement of its historical origin. Contrary to the notion of the totality of an imagined world, I would argue that it is the pathos formula of the rising and sinking ship that calls into being the narrative, not the other way around, a point of view closer but not identical to Azuma Hiroki’s suggestion of database consumption that eschews the traditional conventions of narrative altogether (2001).

The undoing of death and damage and its repetition is at the very heart of the narrative, both within its world –the Yamato recovers the Cosmo cleaner to “undo” the radioactive damage caused by the Gamilas– and outside of it – the fans scandalized by the ‘death’ of the hero (that is, the Yamato itself) who successfully rally to petition the producer to redraw the timeline. I do not mean to say that the burgeoning subculture of fandom that emerged cannot be understood on its own terms, but would like to point out the ways in which consuming narratives and the aesthetics of manga and anime itself were the product of a post-war period trying to come to terms with the legacy of trauma, a point made by Murakami (2001) about the defeat in the Pacific war and by Sawaragi about both the end of the war and the defeat of the citizen movements in 1960s (2005).

More attuned to the conflicting legacy of historical war experience and its displacements is Mizuno Hiromi’s gender-sensitive interpretation (2007). Contrary to Ashbaugh’s somewhat simplistic reading of Yamato as glorifying “*the military and the men who fought and died for Japan in terms consonant with contemporary right-wing nationalism*” (Ashbaugh 2010: 329), Mizuno reads Yamato as a cold-war text that has to negotiate between the desire to undo history and reinstall Japanese

masculinity and the conflicting desire for constitutional pacifism, embodied in article 9 of the Japanese constitution. Defeated by the U.S., Japan as a nation is emasculated and adopts pacifism, an ideology which is coded as feminine. Undoing history is achieved through a series of displacements: the contested past becomes the open future in the anime. The Yamato in spite of its all Japanese crew represents the last hope for the whole of humanity. The choice of names suggests a continuity with feudal Japan rather than with the more problematic aggression of the militaristic regime. The main engineer is called Tokugawa, the executive officer Kodai (literally “ancient time”), and the Captain shares his surname, Okita, with a famous leader of the *Shinsengumi* who killed anti-Tokugawa revolutionaries (Mizuno 2007: 108). The depiction of the blue-skinned adversaries and their clearly German sounding names (Dessler, Shultz, Gantz) distances Japan from the alliance with Nazi Germany and recalibrates its political position in the context of the realpolitik of the cold-war years (See also Mori 2006). Unsurprisingly, the contradictory relationship with the U.S. since 1945 is omitted altogether.²⁶ Although I concur with her analysis of the shifts that allow the Yamato to rewrite history, her conclusion that Yamato is “*the ultimate fantasy of postwar Japan, a wish fulfilling rewriting of the history that takes place in distant future and space*” (2007:109) is only possible because her interpretation is focused on the condensed feature length version of the original series, released in 1977. What she fails to account for is that the wish fulfilling fantasy is destroyed every single time. When the crew of the Yamato realize that they have destroyed the planet of the Gamilas, they feel remorse and Kodai famously utters the words “victory feels like ashes”.²⁷ When in the alternative

²⁶ While Ashbaugh contrasts Yamato with the *Gundam* universe, in which he sees a more sustained criticism of the Japanese empire, Mizuno uses *Chinmoku no Kantai* (Silent Service) as foil to Yamato, where the U.S. are featured prominently (see also Napier 2005).

²⁷ Somewhat less poetically in the original Japanese: 「勝利か、クソでも喰らえ」.

storyline the Yamato is destroyed, sacrificial logic takes over, in which the loss of the ship binds future generations to the self-sacrifice of the crew. Several new series were planned, including five feature-length productions, in the last of which the Yamato again sacrifices herself by blocking a Galactic tidal wave directed at earth by yet another enemy. It was however never realised due to copyright conflicts between Nishizaki and Matsumoto.

Phyrric victory versus sacrificial logic: The contradiction cannot be resolved, and this is what propels the Yamato as an embodiment of trauma. Although the Yamato is not depicted as a ghostly presence in and of itself, the fact that it cannot die and remains unredeemed is clear from the different conflicting timelines that lead to a compulsive repetition.²⁸

VI

“Wegen der Antinomie in ihrem Inneren entspricht Zeit nicht nur dem konventionellen Bild eines Flusses, sondern muss ebenso als eine dem nicht entsprechenden Vorstellung zu denken sein. Wir leben in einem Katarakt der Zeiten.”²⁹

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Putting the youthful and sometimes tempestuous Kodai at the heart of the narrative allows for a further distancing: as Eldad Nakar (2003) has shown with reference to popular depictions of fighting pilots in the manga of the 1950s, the young pilots were portrayed as innocent and pure, but commanded by evil and corrupted seniors.

²⁸ *Space Battleship Yamato* is of course not the only popular culture product that draws from the same pathos formula of the sinking ship. Several films have taken up the story of the Yamato, most recently the live-action film *Otokotachi no Yamato* (2005, directed by Satō Junya). See Gerow 2011 for an analysis of the trauma-related content. Battleships as image-objects have attracted the attention of commercial producers, leading to the production of games such as Kan-Kore (“fleet collection”) and the anime series “Arpeggio of Blue Steel”, in which battleships from the Pacific War are anthropomorphized as girls in frills.

²⁹ “Because of the antinomy on its inside, time should be thinkable in different concepts than the conventional image of the flow of a river. We live in a cataract of times.” (Kracauer 1971: 186)

The art historian and critic Sawaragi Noi has argued that postwar Japanese art history has suppressed the memory of war paintings, an official form of national art the most well-known Japanese artists were impelled –often willingly, sometimes coerced– to participate in. This celebration of Japanese militarism was extinguished from artists’ oeuvres, with the result that images of cruelty and violence ‘sank’ to the level of the “subcultural imagination” of manga, anime and B-movies (Sawaragi 2002: 388). In other words, what we see in the often violent depictions in anime and manga are survivals of earlier images of war that were repressed by the mainstream. Precisely because the postwar amnesia concerning war and wartime aggression was so profound, some image-objects gained a saliency that made them powerful beyond their immediate contexts. Those who try to fix the meaning by assigning pacifist or militaristic motives to *Space Battleship Yamato*’s creators (for example Takekawa 2012) underestimate the autonomous mnemonic forces contained in an object-image such as the Yamato. These forces always exceed signification and give the object-image the power to re-embed itself in new contexts. *Space Battleship Yamato* is thus not a narrative that uses some tropes from World War II, but an attempt to master its object-image by binding it into a narrative and making it ‘productive’ of meaning. However, such attempts at narrative binding can never entirely neutralize the energetic charge that the image-object as pathos formula contains. That is why a content analysis that aims for the ‘meaning’ of a narrative cannot provide an explanation for the enduring popularity of either *Godzilla* or *Space Battleship Yamato*. Both the monster and the image-object of the battleship cannot be contained by their media context, because their referent is always outside the narrative and haunts every attempt at fixation. Models of media who distinguish between the internal logic of a media products and external, usually commercial motives for one product to occupy several platforms fail to address the fact that it is precisely in the return of the image-object that capitalism and

what the Germans call *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*³⁰ dovetail and reinforce each other. The compulsive repetition becomes productive here: further displacement means more products, more versions, without any final closure.

Methodologically this means that the analytical distinction between an image-object and its context becomes less clear-cut: affectively charged image-objects have the power to burst through particular contexts and to collapse historical horizons. The affectively charged image-object is never just of its time, as material and medial artefact it is also always cotemporaneous. I would argue that a science of the image/medium that considers images to be mere products expressive of particular contexts obfuscates the particular power of image-objects to disturb the smooth flow of time. Image-objects stick out of the proverbial river of time Kracauer alludes to, and from there can erupt into the present. As Warburg said: they are alive, yet they cannot hurt me.

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³⁰ "coming to terms with one's past and overcoming it", a core trope in German postwar cultural life, suggesting redemption of the Nazi past through confrontation of the crimes and attempts at understanding.

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