

# 70 Years Under a Cloud: Information and Social Imaginaries of the Atomic Bombs

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This work reviews the widespread visions that the world inherited from the atomic bombs, 70 years after they were dropped for the first time on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some news reports related with atomic bombings, in connection with the historical facts, give us an opportunity to reassess the value of images as an object of historical study and also as part of a complex cultural process that forms our social imaginaries on the subject of nuclear bombs.

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## **NEW STORIES, OLD PERCEPTIONS**

Beyond the historical dates of August 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> that every year lead the journalism to depict images and cover the commemorative acts of the atomic bombings on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, recent news stories have shown, once again, contrasting social perceptions on this topic.

According to some communication studies, our knowledge, or the conception we have about the things we know, affects our perceptions in some way. In addition, our experience may also be considered significant in the construction of our vision.

## **VISIONS UNDER THE CLOUD**

With the commemoration of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, an important number of mass media around the world turned their eyes to these Japanese cities.

Again the voices of survivors are a reminder of the human dimension of that historic event. The indelible chronicle of their pain, the meanings of their historical lessons or their constant appeal for peace seem to attract the world.

However, there are very few direct witnesses of those experiences. One of them, Hiroyuki Miyagawa, commented in 2000 that among tens of thousands of victims, or *hibakusha* who remained in Hiroshima, only 100 people usually share their memories (González, 2000a).

The silence of the survivors is related to factors of complex personal, psychological and social nature. Mourning, physical and moral suffering, social discrimination and official censorship imposed on the nuclear topics blocked many attempts of expression from those affected.

The experience of being personally in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to listen direct testimonies from the people *in situ* contributes to the formation of a different vision—or perhaps many others—about the significant historical events that these cities represent.

An important part of the public opinion in the world shares the iconic vision of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as an abstract cloud, accompanied by a brief lesson learned in elementary education. As a contrast, there is a human vision of life and death that marked those who inhabited these cities on August 1945.

From the journalistic approach it is also possible to find some divergent visions in newspaper archives. Considering the example of Hiroshima: on August 7, 1945, none of the major newspapers in Japan had headlines, graphics or texts to highlight the event that would mark the historical transcendence of the city. Only one national newspaper (*Asahi*) published a short article with three lines referring to a bombing that had caused “some damage” in the city. By contrast, in the United States and the Allied countries the debut of the most powerful weapon in the world occupied large spaces.

From the personal to the social perception, it is possible to dis-

cover more contrasting views of Hiroshima: from the journalistic views or from the historical narratives; from the bomber Enola Gay or from the mainland at ground level; from the Japanese press or the American press; from the silence of censorship or from dissemination through propaganda; from the perspective of the victors or the perspective of the defeated in the war; from the perspective of scientists or the perspective of the military strategies; from the political discourse or from a humanitarian voices.

There are many ways of perceiving Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This work is not intended to thoroughly explore all these possibilities, but somehow outline confrontations in the perceptions from various angles, especially from visual resources and experiences of receptors in different parts of the world that have influenced the formation of collective imaginaries about atomic weapons.

### **PANELS: HORRORS, GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

In this commemorative year some news evoked contrasting views about the atomic bombings and the end of the war. On one side, as we have noted, many people put special emphasis on Japan and the bombed cities. However, there are other forms of perception in different geographical areas.

In the US, the population of New Mexico lived a celebratory mood as they recalled 70 years of manufacturing and testing the first atomic bombs in the Manhattan Project in Los Alamos laboratory. News stories of this area deployed large share of people between Science Festival and the recreation of the first atomic test with a new “Trinity supercomputer” with the possibility to get a modern dimension on 3D. Part of the town supports the official version that atomic weapons ended the war, and there is a special pride and sense of belonging to that episode, being part of the families that originally worked on that project.

Meanwhile, in the capital city there was a different vision to evoke

the events, with the sample of 6 works from *The Hiroshima Panels* by the Japanese artists Iri and Toshi Maruki, as part of “Hiroshima-Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Exhibition” open to the public in the American University Museum at the Katzen Arts Center.

Iri Maruki was born in Hiroshima and after the bombs he traveled with his wife to look for their relatives. From their impressions and later research on what happened, they created more than 15 works in 30 years, not only describing the horror of the massacre, but also criticizing the war and weapons, in a general sense.

Some critics and visitors to this exhibition expressed messages of regret, solidarity with the victims or, in some cases, even surprise while getting for the first time a non conventional perspective. However, for others the paintings do not modify the repeated historical justification of the use of bombs and the Japanese blame for provoking the war.

These dialectics on innocence and guilt and war responsibilities maintains a significant influence on the perceptions of society related with a same object or representation of a same historical episode. A controversy of this kind happened in 1995 during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the atomic bombings, when the Smithsonian Museum of Air and Space abandoned plans to display artifacts belonging to victims of the bombing, and instead highlighted the plane that delivered the bomb, the *Enola Gay*, in the middle of a controversy from War Veterans groups and spokespersons of various social groups, with completely different arguments and views.

The murals of Maruki can help change the view of the American people and to challenge the government’s argument that the bombs were necessary. However, for some people, especially from Asia, it is not easy to see the Japanese as innocent victims in the Second World War.

Precisely for this reason, the exhibition —opened this summer in Washington and scheduled to go on several institutions in the eastern

United States— deliberately included the panels *Crows* (The Hiroshima Panels, 1972) and *Death of American prisoners of war* (The Hiroshima Panels, 1971). These works criticize discrimination against Koreans who were conscripted to perform forced labor and illustrate the death of some prisoners of war from the Allied side who died during the bombing or, according to some witnesses, were killed by angry survivors in Hiroshima stoned on them. All this was displayed with the idea of presenting the Japanese as not the only victims, as explained by professor Peter Kuznick, director of the Institute of Nuclear Studies at American University.

This prominent historian has long experience lecturing on the subject and traveling every summer to Hiroshima and Nagasaki with his students. Kuznick is aware that the students' impressions and feelings after being in the bombed cities and having close contact with *hibakusha* changed significantly. In these young generations a different social imaginary is being created, challenging the official and repeated notions on the same topic.

### **ANOTHER CONTROVERSIAL ISSUE**

Other contrasting views can be found in the disclosure of images through information networks such as the Internet. As an example, in May 2008, the archives at the Hoover Institution in Stanford University declassified photographs from the Robert L. Capp Collection allegedly corresponding to the bombing of August 6, 1945, in Hiroshima.

According to the institution, the images came from a photographic film, found in a cave by Capp, while in a military mission in Japan, at the end of the war.

This version was widely reported in the media worldwide as well as in the book *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb Against Japan*, by Sean L. Malloy, professor in the University of California.

A group of researchers from the Peace Museum in Hiroshima and *Chūgoku* newspaper as well as the scholar and the Hoover Institution had to acknowledge later on that that some of the pictures shown, may not correspond to the tragedy of Hiroshima, but to the great Kanto earthquake that had affected Tokyo, Yokohama and surrounding areas in 1923 (Hoover Institution, 2008).

This correction did not have the same impact as that of the “never-before-published photographs” allegedly from Hiroshima. Beyond the analysis of image content or significance of the scenes of death and devastation, hundreds of websites have been devoted to show contrasting visions that are associated, sometimes more with historical conventions than with a deep knowledge of the theme.

Evidently, after 70 years of chronological distance from the events captured in these images, the forms of dissemination are infinitely faster and have more possibilities for a global impact.

The publication of these alleged new photographs of a past event (even when there was uncertainty on their fidelity), opened a debate with all kinds of expressions. Hundreds of messages posted on the Internet, strongly criticized the US government decision to use atomic bombs at the end of World War II. On the other side, there were also repeated messages of pride or justification for such actions, and opponents of the Japanese side in the confrontation.

Beyond the criticism of governments representing these two nations at the end of the war, the comments were sometimes simplified by blaming “the other”: the Japanese, the Americans. Few comments were really focused on observing the details in the pictures, or the authenticity of the object of historical analysis. Overall, the event of the disclosure came to gain more attention than the content of the images.

Once again, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are the focus of an unfinished debate. From the emblematic photograph of the mushroom cloud rising over the sky of the affected towns until these detailed scenes of

bodies stuck to the ground, there are still many perspectives associated with previous notions or social constructions on these historical events.

In contrast to the abstract icon of the mushroom cloud, and though far less known in global scenarios, the visions from the victims or close people in the Japanese context, may bring more elements to the debate on the significance of nuclear weapons, while adding to our knowledge the significance of the direct experience.

## **IMAGES AND CULTURAL PROCESSES**

In previous studies I have tried to explore the possibilities of the journalism in 1945 to publish the news about the atomic bomb, despite a strong process of censorship, both in the media in the United States and the Allied world, as in the same Japanese territory.

Although in this work there are no detailed references to those previous analyses, we may recall the well-documented process of censorship that was imposed on Japan following its defeat. Further than the censored notes, reports, photographs and other works that could have had reveal what happened after the atomic bombs, and the propaganda to inform only official versions, there were also artistic forms of expression that were silenced.

Images have been considered as cultural objects studied in the field of communication disciplines, and have also an important value for historical analysis. Likewise, various forms of visual art, have contributed to the dissemination of knowledge and experience about the atomic bombings, and therefore somehow have affected the social perception on these issues.

In addition to the image itself as an object of analysis, its exhibition is immerse in a cultural process, that is, involving the debate on whether the visual object faithfully represents the external reality or if it is a subjective art product, we must always consider that the receivers are always decoding these signals, according to their own ex-

perience, knowledge or social conventions.

This leads us to recognize that in every process to register an experience is possible to get influences from any participant in the communicative act. That is why the people somehow involved with the atomic bombings had a wide range of perceptions depending on their positions or roles. That happened for example with the experience and views from the crew that dropped that bombs contrasting with those who were attacked. Similarly, the visions that these same actors could communicate from their experiences, have been reproduced according to some subjective conventions, and have nourished radically different perceptions in different parts of the world, even after 70 years.

## **SOCIAL IMAGINARY**

For the anthropologists Ardevol & Muntañola (2004): “The concept of imaginary let us explore the processes of creation and configuration of subjectivity, while bringing us with the idea of a collective imagination, as the result of a specific era and of some social conventions and cultural norms” (p. 15).

In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger confirms the idea that knowledge affects the way to look and proposes a path to the historical, cultural and contextual analysis of the artwork, and production of visual images. “For Berger, what we know affects what we observe, so we never see the object itself, but the relationship we have with this object intervenes in our eyes”. (Ardevol & Muntañola, 2004, p. 18).

Beyond this individual perception are the conventions for this look, that somehow can be studied under the concept of the social imaginary of the French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis (1983), as a result of a complex series of relationships among discourses and collective actions, or among visions, values, perceptions, ideas, preferences and behaviors of those belonging to a culture.

According to these ideas, the collective imaginary does not produce



uniform behaviors, but trendsetting, and these also are changing, often with the significant participation of the mass media.

The exhibition of the previously referred Marukis panels appeared in traditional and web media, and motivated comments from the public even without having directly attended the event. In some cases there were comments on the historical theme, more than on the works themselves.

The same would happen with the photographs released by the Hoover Institution. They underwent as a kind of social thermometer. More than a scientific observation, they caused hundreds of manifestations from the collective memories, still under the umbrella of certain historical and cultural conventions.

Few people discussed the quality or authenticity of the historical object itself and they mainly expressed their perceptions affiliated to the social imaginary on the issue. In that sense, Ardevol & Muntanola (2004) consider that:

Photography is much more than an image, understood as a copy or reproduction of the real world, is a place of negotiation of power and identity, a space for theoretical and methodological reflection, a means of intercultural communication, a social link, a means of discovery, a field of experimentation (p. 24).

In different works, Michael Foucault describes how power produces somehow effects of truth and knowledge (Foucault, 1995). The images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have been exposed from different perspectives, under aesthetic standards and specific power guidelines since the end of World War II until today.

Among this clash of visions, from the perspective of power, some artistic expressions have sought to be an escape, or the transmission of experiences that, as mentioned at the beginning, may be connected with knowledge, to influence the way we look something.

## **BETWEEN THE EXPERIENCE AND ART**

The survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki kept at the bottom of their atomic experiences, an aspect that many artists in the world have appreciated further than the traditional canons of aesthetics: the vision. No one else in the world has had that experience and has the possibility to convey it in such an authentic way as the *hibakusha*. John Berger has devoted part of his work to the, saying that: “Hiroshima summarizes the importance of retaining the look, as a measure of knowledge and moral vision”. This author notes that Western countries need information on the effects of the atomic bombings and there has been a systematic and horrific suppression of significant facts. According to Berger, we have been far from assimilating the original significance of Hiroshima, a significance that once was “so clear, so horrifying vivid” (Maclear, 1999, p. 17).

For some poets who survived the bombs, after the experience, words were not enough to describe everything they had seen, heard and felt in Hiroshima and Nagasaki; images were also missing. Those who could miraculously register graphically what had happened had in their hands a precious resource to show the world the effects of the atomic bombs. That is precisely why the Allied Command Forces that occupied Japan after the war embraced the popular paradigm: a picture can say more than a thousand words.

The strength of the conspicuous images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had hit the rigorous censorship of the occupation and it was even more severe as graphic evidence. Some texts may have had the fortune of escaping the barriers of American censors, but in the case of photographs or films it was less likely.

Considering photography as a form of expression, usually located between journalism and art, graphics captured from the planes that bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as those that some survivors could take right on the very days of the attacks may represent the first visual evidence of what happened with the atomic bombs.

Far from the abstract mushroom cloud, Yoshito Matsushige was the first man to rescue his camera and hit the streets of Hiroshima to capture the only five pictures that were taken on the very day of the explosion in the city. According to Matsushige, his photos were not published until October of that year. The photographer was not fully aware of the censorship policies and dared to publish the historical graphics in the evening edition of the newspaper *Chūgoku*. He was reprimanded by US Army officers who confiscated his photos. However, he kept the negatives, which later would be used for reprints and released worldwide (González, 2000b). They transcended as the very first graphic evidence of the reality under the emblematic and abstract atomic clouds.

The photographer and writer Robert Del Tredici commented that the famous photograph of the mushroom cloud was a “grotesque example” of the kind of image that remains isolated in an abstract distance, and misinforms on a matter of vital importance (Maclear, 1999, p. 17).

The collection of photos taken by the investigating committee ABCC (Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission) to study the radiation effects on the victims was not declassified for decades. These graphics censored by the US government were finally disclosed in 1980, and they keep two visions that were out of the reach for the public for a long time: the human remains, and the subsequent suffering from the nuclear attacks.

There are images of the mountains of skeletons, completely naked teens showing off their charred bodies, the bodies of mothers and children, and the boy with black face after the “black rain”, holding a rice ball (*onigiri*) in his hand, holding on tightly to life.

The photos taken by Yosuke Yamahata on August 10, 1945 in Nagasaki, have been rescued and exhibited worldwide, and are the main part of the book *Nagasaki Journey*, published for the 50th anniversary of the bombing by Pomegranate Artbooks. It highlights the

faces of civilians, who unfortunately sometimes seem to be invisible in wartime.

In 1978 *Hiroshima-Nagasaki: A Pictorial Record of the Atomic Bomb Destruction* was published, a work that intended to open the eyes of the Americans, with the collaboration of thousands of Japanese who recovered images of what US officials had censored.

After the occupation, many of these realistic testimonies have moved to artistic fields, with the creativity of photographers like Sho-meï Tomatsu, who recovered several graphs from the ruins of the church of Santa María (now widely known as the Urakami Cathedral) that have been exhibited since 1962 in the collection *11:02 Nagasaki*.

## **LEGACY FOR THE WORLD:**

### **PICTORICAL ART AND SOCIAL SENSIBILITY**

In the 50s the Japanese Communist Party promoted the realization of “reporting paintings”. At that time, artists such as Yamashita Kikuji chose the atomic issue. Shusaku Arakawa was also inspired by Hiroshima for his exhibitions, with obvious social concerns, between realism and surrealism or abstraction.

Such demonstrations have been associated with remote works as *The Disasters of War*, that Francisco de Goya painted to depict the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in his art. The needlework of Chilean women *Arpilleras* who suffered repressions of Augusto Pinochet and thus manifested with complaints through crafts are also remembered.

The painter Keisuke Yamamoto created a mural entitled Hiroshima with notable reminiscences of the famous *Guernica*, painted by Pablo Picasso in 1937.

Moreover, in Japan since the late 60s, millions of young people have had contact with the experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, through the series of autobiographical drawings by Keiji Nakazawa, *Hadashi no Gen (Barefoot Gen)*. And also in this country, as previously noted, the Maruki panels have had an important impact depict-

ing the experiences of the bombed cities.

In a different geographical space, Andy Warhol in 1965 became one of the first American visual artists to make specific reference to Hiroshima and Nagasaki in his painting *Atomic Bomb*. Another renowned creator, the Spanish master of surrealism, Salvador Dali was inspired by what he called “nuclear mysticism” to represent his particular vision in works such as *Melancolía atómica e idilio de uranio*, *Las tres esfinges de Bikini* and *Leda Atómica*.

Similarly, a considerable number of artistic works related with the bombs can also be found in Latin-American countries such as Nicaragua and Colombia.

In the library of the Direction of the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima, can be found a book titled in Spanish *Cuaderno de Hiroshima*. It is a compilation of 40 works of Venezuelan painter Alirio Rodríguez, as a result of a visit to Hiroshima, accompanied with texts by the poet José Ramón Medina (Rodríguez & Medina, 1996).

Another Venezuelan painter had previously expressed his concerns about the meaning of atomic weapons. As reported by the Venezuelan researcher Willy Aranguren, the local artist Salvador Valero, also reflected in his work *La inmólación de Hiroshima*, a scene of “really bloody, painful, with languorous figures, pitiful, horrified at the tragedy, the fire, the shed blood. Figures are presented nude or partially nude, headless, hieratic, that remind death, desolation, the Holocaust and human misery” (Aranguren, 2001, p. 98). To Aranguren, despite the remoteness of Valero, sometimes rather than to concentrate on simple daily matters in a small village, this artist had a broad historical awareness.

In Mexico, the muralist movement characterized by its social inspiration also reflected the theme in the work *El átomo* by David Alfaro Siqueiros. Particularly this artist, close friend with the Japanese Taro Okamoto, had great influence in the creation of *Asu no shinwa* (*The myth of tomorrow*), an important mural completed in Mexico in 1968

that is currently exhibited in the center of Tokyo. In his work, the Japanese artist also reflects in bright colors and with a symbolic touch his views on the significance of nuclear weapons as a threat to the future of humanity.

Further than the pictorial record, many other artistic works from other disciplines are related with the atomic bombs and somehow can also influence the vision that people have inherited about these historical events.

Transcending the lines written in Japanese or American newspapers, all these evidences of cultural production, speak on behalf of those who felt a need to express their dramatic and sobering experience. During the occupation of Japan, almost all cultural production was censored: films, novels, children's books, records. And yet, in all these areas there have been recovered evidences of how the bombs were perceived at the time.

In seven decades, many important artistic works have been added, as well as new graphic or audiovisual evidences about these historical events of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. None of them will be a light that illuminates absolutely our knowledge on the subject, nor will summarize the experience of those who lived through the atomic bombings from the air or from the ground. However, all may contribute to our visions, and to reshape the way we build the social imaginary about the atomic bombs.

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