REVIEW

Children and War. The Children's Train and Grave of the Fireflies. What do these films have in common?

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Abstract: The proposal for this review is two films that focus on children and war. They are films that deal with two stories that took place between 1945 and 1952. The choice of films that are apparently so distant and different aims to present two possibilities of studying the history that lies behind the fictions and the 80 years that separate us from the darkest events in our history. Since literature and cinema allow the silences and pain of those who survived to be exposed and made known, I propose the films: *The Italian Train of Happiness* and *Grave of the Fireflies* as a possibility of reflecting on history.

Keywords: Children and wars; fiction and reality; history; literature; cinema.

Resumo: A proposta para essa resenha são dois filmes que têm as crianças e a guerra como foco. São filmes que tratam de duas histórias que ocorreram durante os anos de 1945 a 1952. A opção por filmes aparentemente tão distantes e diferentes tem por objetivo apresentar duas possibilidades de estudar a história que subjaz por trás das ficções e os 80 anos que nos separam de um dos acontecimentos mais sombrios da nossa história. Como a literatura e o cinema permitem que os silêncios e as dores dos que sobreviveram sejam expostos e dados a conhecer, proponho os filmes *O trem Italiano da Felicidade* e *Túmulo dos Vagalumes* como possibilidade de reflexões sobre a história.

Palavras-chave: Crianças e guerras; ficção e realidade; história; literatura; cinema.

1. INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the question seems misplaced when one considers the titles of the films. One places happiness at the center, while the other speaks of a

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grave. Both, however, address the themes of children and war; this may serve as an initial point of connection, since both films are set during World War II. The first takes place between 1946 and 1952, while the second unfolds in 1945. Another similarity lies in the fact that both films are literary adaptations: the first is based on Viola Ardone's novel *The Children's Train* (*Il treno dei bambini*, 2021), and the second draws from the short story *Grave of the Fireflies* (1967), written by Akiyuki Nosaka. Two works of literary fiction were transformed into cinematic narratives. The parallel, however, does not end there. Both films draw upon real stories as the foundation for their fiction. The first was partly inspired by Giovanni Rinaldi's historical account, *I treni della felicità. Storie di bambini in viaggio tra due Italie,* while the second is rooted in Nosaka's personal experience of the bombing of Kobe in 1945, during which he lost nearly his entire family. What unites them is the theme of war; what distinguishes them are the terrified, questioning eyes of children confronted with the nightmare created by the insanity of adults who wage wars. There is no shortage of films and documentaries dealing with this theme; the challenge was to choose one to recommend. Equally difficult is writing about children in wartime. Difficult, but necessary—especially in times when the absence of utopias seems greater than the absence of hope. The historical setting is the Second World War; the sites of conflict are distant, and the parties involved attempt to justify the unjustifiable. Yet literature and cinema allow the silences and suffering of survivors to be revealed and remembered. For this reason, I propose in this review an examination of two films: one that speaks of hope and the other that embodies its opposite. Both offer reflections on history.

2. FROM HISTORY TO LITERATURE. FROM LITERATURE TO CINEMA

The synopses are straightforward. The first film spans the years 1946 to 1952, in the post-war period, when many children from impoverished regions of southern Italy were taken from the harsh poverty in which they lived and relocated to the North, where they were welcomed and nourished by families in better financial circumstances. The second film is set in Japan in 1945, following the struggle of siblings Seita and Setsuko to survive after the bombing of Kobe by the United States on February 4, 1945. The attack devastated the city, claimed their mother's life, and forced them to confront all the misfortunes brought about by war. Yet if the synopses are simple, the stories themselves are not. They are a novel and a short story that use history not merely as background, but as the very stage for real dramas. Since literature served as the medium through which these stories were transformed into cinematic fiction, it is fitting to begin with the historical events that inspired them. At this point, it is necessary to distinguish them in order to narrate them more clearly.

Viola Ardone's *The Children's Train* does not depict war directly—not even a trace of it: no destruction, no battles between opposing sides. We perceive it only through the conditions of people's lives and the harshness that the post-war period imposed on survivors. Amerigo Speranza and his mother are among them. The impoverished neighborhood, the thin soup, the tiny home, the barefoot child, the boy's frail frame—these details reveal the scars that war left on that place and those lives (Figure 1). Like Amerigo, other children from his street would be taken by train to live in northern cities.

Figure 1. Amerigo and his mother, Antonietta, on the street of their neighborhood

Source: Frame from the film *The Children's Train* (2024).

These were special trains operated by the National Railway Network. The first departed from the city of Milan to Reggio Emilia, carrying 1,800 children. Not all families allowed their children to travel north, where they would remain for six months before returning home. Despite her pain, Antonietta placed Amerigo on what came to be known as the Train of Hope (Figure 2). The dramatic departure of the children, in the film's version, is portrayed with a certain irony: a heated argument breaks out at the station between mothers who allowed their children to leave and those who insisted the children would be thrown into burning ovens or eaten by communists. Although this may appear as an allusion to Nazi practices, the discussion was actually directed against the Italian Communist Party, since the initiative was organized by the Union of Italian Women (*Unione Donne Italiane*) and led by PCI activist Teresa Noce. The program began in Milan but quickly spread to other northern cities, such as Bologna and Parma. In total, nearly 70,000 children were hosted for six

months by families who clothed, fed, and provided schooling for them (Figure 3). According to Viola Ardone, in an interview given to *Aventura da História* on March 28, 2021, "the families were not wealthy, but very generous," like the one that welcomed Amerigo.

Figure 2. Amerigo and Antonietta. The farewell at the station

Source: Frame from the film *The Children's Train* (2024).

Figure 3. *The Children's Train*. The departure

Source: Frame from the film *The Children's Train* (2024).

In the same interview, Ardone explained that the novel which inspired the film was the result of extensive research she conducted on those years of war

and post-war, as well as the life stories that shaped the narrative, later adapted for the screen. One of her sources of research and inspiration was Giovanni Rinaldi's 2014 book, in which he interviewed fifteen children who experienced those events, including Amerigo Marino, the main character of the film. Directed by Cristina Comencini, the film begins with Amerigo as an adult, a renowned violinist preparing for a concert when he receives a letter informing him of the death of his mother, Antonietta. Amerigo returns to his hometown and his childhood home. From that point on, we follow Viola Ardone's story of the Italian *The Children's Train*, focusing especially on the life of Amerigo Speranza. In the fictionalized version, the children arrive in Modena and are chosen by local families—except for Amerigo. Unsure of what to do with him, a young trade unionist decides to take Amerigo to her home, where he lives with her family (Figure 4). The film then recounts Amerigo's life during the six months he spends with this family, particularly his bond with his single foster mother. We witness Amerigo's daily life with her, his experiences at school, his learning process, and, above all, his discovery of music and the violin.

Figure 4. Amerigo and his new family. Scene in which Amerigo receives the violin as a gift

Source: Frame from the film *The Children's Train* (2024).

Figure 5. Amerigo learning to play the violin

Source: Frame from the film *The Children's Train* (2024).

From the days and months he spent with his single foster mother, with the new family, and with his violin, until his return to Naples, we also follow the readings of the letters Antonietta wrote to him. Like all the other children, he too returned home wearing shoes and carrying a violin under his arm. The violin, which he kept under his bed, was pawned by his mother in order to buy food. Saddened—especially because he was the only child who never received letters from the host family—Amerigo goes to the headquarters of the Union of Italian Women (UDI), where he discovers all the letters that had been sent to him but hidden by his mother. Shaken, he returns home, confronts his mother, and receives a slap across the face. Without his violin, consumed by anger and longing for his former foster family, he runs away from Naples, back to Modena, and to his adoptive mother (Figure 6). The opening scene is revisited: we enter with Amerigo into his tiny home, now without his mother, and see beneath the empty bed a box containing the violin. This marks the emotional climax of the film and of Amerigo's story with his mother. He opens the violin case and finds inside a receipt from a Neapolitan pawnshop, where Antonietta had redeemed the violin. The film ends with this reunion of Amerigo, his violin, and his mother. What the film does not reveal, however, is the continuation of Amerigo's story: he later discovered that he had siblings and nephews. Moving from fiction to reality, Amerigo Speranza—whose real name is Américo Marino—was from San Severo, later moved to Ancona, and his single mother was the union activist Derna Scandali. These stories can also be found in Alessandro Piva's 2011 documentary *Pasta Nera* (Figure 7), written by Piva and Giovanni Rinaldi.

Figure 6. Amerigo and his adoptive mother

Source: Frame from the film *The Children's Train* (2024).

Figure 7. Américo and Derna during the filming of the documentary *Pasta Nera*

Source: Américo and Derna (2005). Promotional photo from the documentary *Pasta Nera*, by Giovanni Rinaldi (2011).

If *The Children's Train* does not depict the war directly, the animated film *Grave of the Fireflies* places war at its very center. Based on the short story *Hotaru no Haka*, written in 1967 by Akiyuki Nosaka, the film was scripted and directed by Isao Takahata, produced by Studio Ghibli, and released in 1988. It is regarded as a masterpiece of Japanese and world animation.

The formal introduction is deliberate, as all those involved—directly or indirectly—are connected to the real history of Japan during and after the war. Both Nosaka and Takahata witnessed the destruction of Tokyo and Kobe. Although the book was written in 1967, it was only adapted into an animated

film twenty-one years later because Akiyuki Nosaka felt that animation was the only medium that could truly convey what he had written; other attempts at live-action adaptations did not satisfy him, according to the author. The production by Studio Ghibli, founded in 1985 by directors Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata and prod

As all memory is personal and affective, it is understandable why the short story and the animated film reveal two facets of the same history: the lived experiences of Nosaka (Seita), who was 14 at the time, and of Keiko (Setsuko), his two-year-old sister, under a sky illuminated by the bombs dropped on Kobe, and the fictionalized account, which depicts the siblings' struggle to survive the events of the war. In a semi-autobiographical narrative, Nosaka recounts the story of the siblings attempting to survive after their home is destroyed by incendiary bombs dropped by the US Air Force. While the depiction of survival in the animation is both traumatic and tender, the reality retained the scars of war and Nosaka's personal experience: he was orphaned, wandered the streets, shelters, and relatives' homes, sold the few family belongings, stole to avoid starvation, and witnessed his sister die of malnutrition. Consumed by guilt over her death, Nosaka waited twenty years before writing the story as a form of catharsis and tribute to Keiko.

In this scene (Figure 8), Seita and Setsuko search for shelter during the city bombings. The sky of Kobe blends bombs and fireflies.

Figure 8. Scene of Seita and Setsuko under the destroyed Kobe sky

Source: Frame from the film Grave of the Fireflies (1988).

This is not the opening image of the animation (Figure 9). The first scene shows Seita leaning against a column in a space resembling a cell, surrounded by other young people, nearly dead. Seita drops a small colored tin can beside his almost lifeless body. One of the guards, who is counting the dead, picks up the tin, inspects it, opens it, and throws it away. From this moment, the story of the siblings unfolds.

Figure 9. Seita and Setsuko with the tin where they kept sweets to stave off hunger

Source: Frame from the film Grave of the Fireflies (1988).

The order of the images presented here does not necessarily follow the film's chronological sequence, as the story begins in the village where the siblings lived with their mother. Their father had gone to war, of whom only this reference remains. The house was a typical Japanese dwelling, constructed of wood and paper. Impeccably organized, it contrasted with the disorder outside and the fear the family felt during nightly air raids. During the day, life seemed almost normal, until nightfall, when the threat of bombs caused constant anxiety. Despite the fears, the war seemed distant, and they had access to bomb shelters. These shelters were where they sought refuge on the afternoon and night of February 4, 1945, when the first US bombing of Kobe occurred (Figure 10)—the first in a series of tests with new chemical weapons. Kobe was the target.

Figure 10. Seita and Setsuko during the bombing of Kobe

Source: Frame from the film Grave of the Fireflies (1988).

Seita and Setsuko survived the attack, but their family did not. They tried to find their mother and uncles. Driven by Setsuko's insistence, who longed for her mother, Seita reached a hospital where the bombing casualties were being treated. His mother, entirely bandaged, revealed only her glowing eyes and mouth—a haunting image reminiscent of the victims of napalm in Vietnam. Napalm, developed in 1942, had immense incendiary power and was dropped over Kobe. After discovering their mother's death, the siblings sought refuge with an aunt. When they could no longer pay for food and lodging, they were sent away and began living in a shelter near a lake (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Road leading Seita and Setsuko to their shelter

Source: Frame from the film Grave of the Fireflies (1988).

During the day, Seita searched for or stole food to ensure their survival. They played, laughed, and at night, hunted fireflies. They placed the fireflies in a tin can and released them at night to illuminate the hole where they slept. Every evening, they hunted fireflies, knowing that each would live only for a single night before dying (Figure 12).

Figure 12. Seita and Setsuko are catching fireflies at dusk

Source: Frame from the film Grave of the Fireflies (1988).

One day, Seita finds Setsuko digging a hole near their dwelling, surrounded by many dead fireflies. When he asks why she is doing this, Setsuko replies that it is for the dead fireflies—a grave for the fireflies, akin to the many graves opened for the victims of war.

From the beginning, we know that Setsuko died of malnutrition, and the film's opening scene shows Seita's death in a sort of prison, alongside other children dying of starvation. Based on Akiyuki Nosaka's memories, we know that he survived, moved to Tokyo, was caught stealing, ended up in a juvenile detention center, reunited with his biological father, attended university, wrote novels and short stories, performed as a singer, and passed away in 2015 at the age of 85.

3. WHEN IMAGES DEMAND HISTORY

The profoundly tragic animation, combined with the most beautiful visual imagery of sunsets and fireflies illuminating the siblings' sleep, compels viewers to seek the real story behind the fictional narrative transformed into animation. Beyond the film's visual metaphors, the historical reality, among many wartime stories, is the escalation of US military action against Japan following the attack

on Pearl Harbor, according to Estevam Silva in an article published on Opera Mundi on March 10, 2025. Among the Japanese cities bombed, Kobe was part of what became known as the "Terror Strategy" under *Operation Meetinghouse*, designed to target civilian populations to force Japan's surrender. The attacks included incendiary bombs, gelignite and white phosphorus bombs, and cluster bombs that dispersed dozens of napalm bombs before reaching the ground. Bombings in Kobe were always conducted at night, when residents were asleep, and the wooden and paper houses left nothing standing. After Kobe, Tokyo was bombed on February 25, 1945, with over 450 tons of cluster bombs dropped, devastating an area of 260 hectares. The following month, Kobe was bombed again, destroying 21% of its urban area. To culminate the terror campaign, in August 1945, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Letícia Yasbek, in her article *Tóquio. O Horror Esquecido* published on the website *AH. Aventuras na História* (March 9, 2019), reports the testimony given by Haruyo Nihei to the German magazine *Deutsche Welle* on the occasion of the 80th anniversary of the Tokyo bombings, providing a sense of the scale of the horror (Figure 13). Nihei recalled that she was eight years old when the bombs began to fall. She went to sleep and, at 11:30 p.m., was awakened by the first air-raid sirens. Unlike previous nights, her father asked them to get up "because the sky that night was different"—it had a threatening, bright red hue. The family sought refuge in a shelter. Upon hearing screams and the sound of approaching attacks, they decided to leave the shelter.

> When we left the shelter, all I could see was fire. Clothes were burning, and debris was sliding down the street in what looked like a river of fire. I remember seeing families, like ours, holding each other's hands and running through the flames. I saw a baby catch fire on the back of its mother. I saw children catch fire, but they kept running.

Figure 13. A mother and child from Nihei's story

Source: Public domain photo.

Similar to the story of Seita and Setsuko, fleeing from the flames in Kobe, the eyes of the children reveal the horror of war. Just as numerous accounts describe the Tokyo bombings, the children of Kobe also witnessed the sky turning a bright red. The image below (Figure 14) shows Akiyuki Nosaka, the author of the short story, with his adoptive sister Kikuko, who later passed away. His younger sister Keiko, born afterward, was depicted in the animated film *Grave of the Fireflies*.

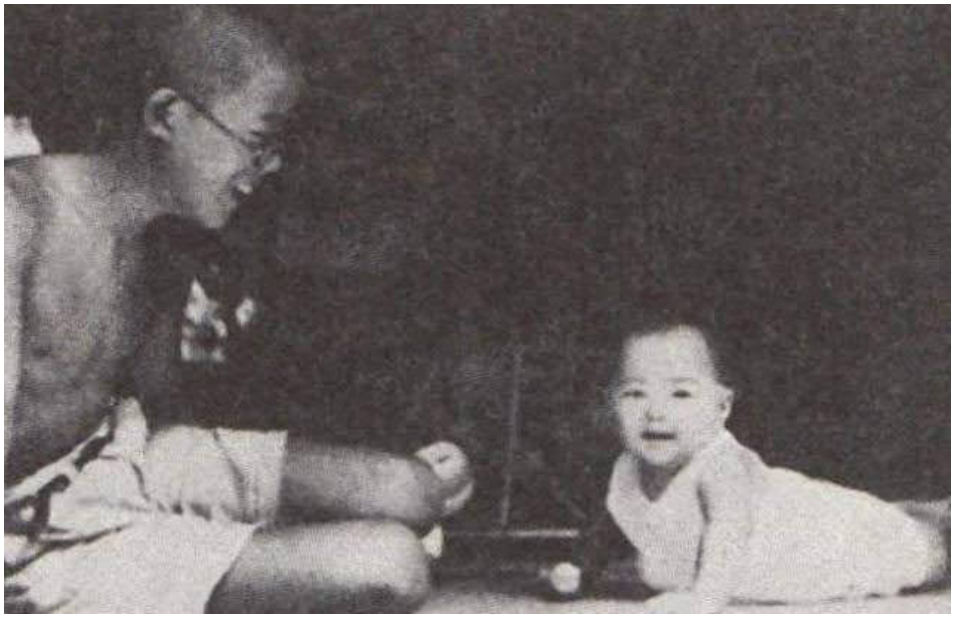

Figure 14. Akiyuki Nosaka (1941) with his adoptive sister

Source: Image published by Silvia Kawanami on November 15, 2022, on the website sankei.com

While words convey the magnitude of violence, images reveal the scope of horror. It would be preferable to linger on the photograph of Akiyuki Nosaka, then 14 years old, smiling beside his sister.

Figure 15. Solidarity March of Italian Women

Source: Image from the website Barinedita. Interview of Giovanni Rinaldi with Mina Barcone, November 21, 2014.

Returning to the initial question, one of the most significant common points between the two films and their underlying histories, beyond those already highlighted, is revealed by the very histories of the countries that experienced the war in 1945. *The Children's Train* recounts a real story that exemplified the greatest acts of solidarity in Italy during those years. *Grave of the Fireflies*, meanwhile, reflects Japan's determination to rebuild materially and to reconstruct itself as a nation of peace.

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