

Hiroshima
Reflection Paper

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CTL 795
Master's Project

During the Spring 2006 semester at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), I enrolled in History 404/604 – American Social History Final Rites: Death and Dying in American Culture. Dr. Elizabeth Raymond, Professor of History in the UNR History Department, taught the course. Although I was relatively familiar with research methods, this course brought my knowledge and abilities more clearly into focus in the use of primary sources. “Students are expected to familiarize themselves with the types of sources that are used in social history as part of the course, which means that research and analysis using primary sources will be required in order to complete assignments” (Raymond).

Every week there was a primary source assignment. We were required “to locate, identify and briefly analyze a specific primary source relating to that week’s topic.” Dr. Raymond defined a primary source as “any piece of historical evidence that was generated in the past by some person who was an actual witness to or participant in the events described.”

The first primary source assignment was due on February 1, 2006. As part of my research, I surfed the World Wide Web. I came across a website called eyewitnesstohistory.com, history through the eyes of those who lived it. At first glance, it appeared that I had found a goldmine of primary historical sources spanning history from the Ancient World to the present. Since I am skeptical of Internet research sources, I dug a little deeper finding out that the site was created and maintained by Ibis Communication, Inc. Being a for-profit corporation, I was a bit cautious about what was posted on the site. Further research revealed that eyewitnesstohistory.com was an award-winning website. The awards included: Yahoo! Pick of the Week, *USA Today*

Outstanding Website, Best of History Website, Innovative Teaching Award and Kim Komando Cool Site of the Day.

With confidence, I began searching the site looking for a primary sources that I could use for my assignment. I ended up using a letter from Milton Elford to his brothers in North Dakota. (See Appendix A.) Milton was the only member of his family to survive the Galveston Hurricane of 1900. Eight thousand of the 38,000 Galveston, Texas residents died September 8, 1900. Milton Elford's letter was a primary source document.

However, before I came across Elford's letter, I happened upon another primary source that totally captured my attention, *The Bombing of Hiroshima, 1945*. Unfortunately, I could not use this primary source since I did not fulfill the requirements of our primary source assignment because History 604 focused only on death and dying in American Culture.

Dr. Michihiko Hachiya survived the first atom bomb dropped August 6, 1945. Not only did he survive the cataclysm, he kept a diary of his experiences from August 6 – September 30, 1945. I was stunned to find out that people survived the atomic explosion. I had held the false belief that every one in Hiroshima, Japan died that gruesome day. The *eyewitnesstohistory* website had excerpts from Dr. Hachiya's diary entries from August 6, 1945 (See Appendix B).

Two excerpts in particular captured my attention.

Excerpt 1:

The shortest path to the street lay through the house next door. So through the house we went – running, stumbling, falling, and then running again until in headlong flight we tripped over something and fell sprawling into the street. Getting to my feet, I discovered that I had tripped over a man's head.

“Excuse me! Excuse me, please!” I cried hysterically.

There was no answer. The man was dead. The head had belonged to a young officer whose body was crushed beneath a massive gate.

Excerpt 2:

There were the shadowy forms of people, some of whom looked like walking ghosts. Others moved as though in pain, the scarecrows, their arms held out from their bodies with forearms and hands dangling. These people puzzled me until I suddenly realized that they had been burned and were holding their arms out to prevent the painful friction of raw surfaces rubbing together.

My curiosity piqued. I had no choice but to read Dr. Hachiya’s complete diary. I went to the UNR library online and discovered to my surprise that Getchell library (the Knowledge Center was not open yet) had a copy. It was not checked out. I immediately put a hold on it and drove directly to campus to pick it up. I checked it out, drove home and read all 200 + pages in about three hours. I knew I had found the focus of my next screenplay.

I had just finished a screenplay *The Sixth Commandment* and was looking for another project. Also, at this time I was a Fulbright candidate to Ireland. As part of that process, I applied to the Master’s in Screenwriting program at the Huston School of Film at the University of Ireland, Galway. In order to graduate from the one-year program, a student was required to complete a polished, professional screenplay. I felt I wanted to write some sort of historical screenplay inspired by the *Hiroshima Diary*. Unfortunately, I did not receive the Fulbright but was accepted by the Huston School of Film (See Pink Tab Section). The year would cost some \$50,000. I did not have the financial resources, but I did have the time to write a screenplay.

Since I only had a part-time job, I had spare time to research additional primary and secondary sources. I was both shocked and stunned to discover there had been no feature film written, produced and shown focusing on the horrific incident other than a made for TV movie in 1980, *Enola Gay: The Men, the Mission, the Atomic Bomb*. In comparison to Dr. Hachiya's diary, the film took the American point of view nearly completely avoiding the gruesome consequences.

I plowed forward on my research. I was taken aback when I discovered that Japanese newsreel footage, U.S. military film footage and newspaper and private photographs documenting the dropping of the first atomic bomb were suppressed and censored for decades (Mitchell). "The color U.S. military footage would remain hidden until the early 1980s, and has never been fully aired. It rests today at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, in the form of 90,000 feet of raw footage labeled #342 USAF" (Mitchell). According to Lt. Col. Daniel A. McGovern, who directed the U.S. military filmmakers in 1945-1946 and managed the Japanese footage, "the main reason it was classified was ... because of the horror, the devastation" (Mitchell).

In May of 1946, the Japanese footage was confiscated by the U.S. and declared top secret. Four members of the Japanese film crew made a duplicate copy of the footage and hid it in a ceiling until the American Occupation ended. If they had been discovered, they would have been most certainly sentenced to 10 years or more of hard labor (Mitchell).

The U.S. government and military released only black and white photographs of blasted buildings and images of a mushroom cloud (See Appendix C). Suppressed and censored, the gruesome footage "documented the physical effects of the bomb, including

the ghostly shadows of vaporized civilians burned into walls; and most chillingly, dozens of people in hospitals who had survived (at least momentarily) and were asked to display their burns, scars, and other lingering effects for the camera as a warning to the world” (Mitchell).

Since 1995, more and more of the footage and photographs have emerged as well as the primary source videos of the atomic bomb survivor (See Appendix D). Hibakusha is the Japanese word for victims of the atomic bomb. Its literal translation into English is “explosion-affected people” (Wikipedia).

In 1986, the Hiroshima Peace Culture Foundation started a project, “Hiroshima Witness – Hibakusha Testimony”, to record hibakusha giving testimonies on video (http://www.pcf.city.hiroshima.jp/virtual/VirtualMuseum_e/visit_e/est_e/panel/A6/6204.htm). Besides the videos (with English subtitles), the project includes photographs, memoirs and paintings. Each year the testimonies of 50 hibakusha are recorded and edited into 20-minute segments.

Although my Hiroshima research was far more extensive than what has been outlined above, these are the pieces that gave me the impetus and staying power to carry me through the screenwriting process. According to one of my screenwriting teachers (See Appendix E), Fulbright Scholar, Robert McKee, “Research wins the war on cliché and is meat to feed the beasts of imagination and invention.” On the other hand, McKee warns, “While research provides material, it’s no substitute for creativity. What’s more, research must not become procrastination.” By April 2006, I was deep into the creative screenwriting process.

For me, the screenwriting process involves “writing from the inside out” (McKee). Research is primary in this process. During several months of research, I watched numerous documentaries and newsreels and read books, magazine articles, newspaper reports and eyewitness accounts.

Next, comes the step-outline. This begins with choosing the story’s genre. I chose to write a classic love story using a traditional genre convention - the parents opposed to the couple’s romance, a personal conflict. On an extra-personal level, two nations, Japan and America, are opposed to their love. And, on a psychological level, both lovers suffer an inner conflict – love vs. duty.

I filled four spiral notebooks with “biographies, the fictional world and its history, thematic notations, images, even snippets of vocabulary and idiom” (McKee). Additionally, I played with story order, possible act structure, inciting incident scenes, subplots and story climax possibilities.

After I felt I achieved what I wanted with the step-outline, I wrote numerous loglines. A logline is a one or two sentence description that captures the unique & conflicting elements of the screenplay. The purpose of the logline is to identify a protagonist, genre, inner & outer conflict, and lead towards a climax, without giving away the ending. They need to be short, easily recited during a conversation, and highly unique. The log line is not intended to tell the full story. Instead, it promotes the story in as few words as possible with the goal of attracting enough interest from a Producer so he/she requests to read the screenplay.

The logline I came up with and continue to use is:

A Japanese-American spy smuggled into Hiroshima, Japan in 1945 falls in love with a young, wealthy Japanese woman jeopardizing his mission

and his life. Their love leads to a chain reaction of events and the decision to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

Once I was more or less happy with the logline, I pitched the story to friends, family members and anyone else who would listen. If I noticed the logline grabbed their attention, I would tell the story in ten minutes or less. When listeners seemed confused, unenthusiastic or darn right bored with the story, I would take that as a cue to rework the step-outline. Once a good majority of listeners reacted enthusiastically to the story, I moved on to the next part of the process, the treatment (See Turquoise Tab Section).

A film treatment expands the step-outline into a scene by scene, “double-spaced, present tense, moment by moment description” (McKee). At this stage, dialogue was avoided in the tradition of Alfred Hitchcock who once remarked, “When the screenplay has been written and the dialogue has been added, we’re ready to shoot.” Instead, I focused on action, the subtext of the character’s thoughts and feelings, setups and payoffs, scene revisions, reorders and cuts.

Now, I was ready to write the first draft of *Hiroshima* converting treatment description to screen description and adding dialogue (See Blue Tab Section). I believe that any writing method that produces a memorable story is a good writing method. For me, the inside-out method creates story and character that tends to reduce cliché, develop craft and fuel creativity.

In summary, I quote from my Huston School of Film, Galway Ireland application: “The Master’s program requires the completion of one quality screenplay in one year. Many U.S. Master’s in Screenwriting programs seem to emphasize quantity rather than quality over two or three years. I prefer an “inside-out” method of screenwriting that

focuses on research, story/character development, a thorough treatment, a first draft and rewriting to a final draft.”

As an educator writing an historical feature film, I was and I am aware that a movie has the power to shape how students and citizens think about the past. As Robert Rosenstone has observed:

It must be clear to even the most academic of historians that the visual media have become (perhaps) the chief conveyor of public history, that for every person who reads a book on an historical topic which a film has been made ... many millions of people are likely to encounter that same past on the screen.

Without sufficient background knowledge and critical viewing skills, “a possible (or probable) outcome is for the filmic account to ‘colonize’ their [students’] thinking about the past – taking up residence in the mind as a kind of literal truth” (VanSledright, 2002).

Being aware of this pitfall and the emotional, mental and psychological impact of a powerful story, well told, I attempted to write a screenplay that was historically authentic in a fictional context. Story narrative has the potential to impact and influence viewers globally and is far more influential than a documentary or docudrama. Also, I avoided, as much as possible, presentism: “the act of viewing the past through the lens of the present ... a way of thinking that requires little effort and comes quite naturally” (Wineburg, 2001).

Striving for authenticity does not mean actuality. If I were striving for actuality, I would have written a documentary. The beauty of in-depth historical research of time, place, attitudes, appearance, customs and events is that it eventually “reaches a saturation point” (McKee). Then, almost miraculously, the story begins to take on an atmosphere

that smacks of authenticity. As a result, the audience is swept up into the world of the story. The audience believes the story, or as Samuel Taylor Coleridge suggested, the audience willingly suspends disbelief (McKee). Aristotle said it this way: “For the purposes of [story] a convincing impossibility is preferable to an unconvincing possibility” (McKee, p. 186). In other words, the audience reacts to the story as if it is real. Readers of *Hiroshima* and future film audiences will decide whether or not authenticity without presentism has been achieved. After eight drafts and more drafts to come, this has been my intention.

“Presentism is a problem that history feature films typically exhibit” (Metzger). When presentism is coupled with a dominant narrative viewpoint about the past without counter-narratives, then there is a strong tendency for uncritical audiences to mistake authenticity for actuality - the filmic account colonizes our thinking about the past. Then the questions are: what is the intention of the writer, producer and director? Where does propaganda begin and an authentic story end?

A successful, historical feature film, *The Patriot*, presents a one-sided narrative where the American good guys defeat the British bad guys. In addition, this film extracts, for the most part, historically authentic White racism from its South Carolina military heroes – presentism. This is not necessarily a bad thing in and of itself.

“Filmmakers often use an historic event as a metaphor for current concerns, attitudes and values that are easier to sell to contemporary audiences” (Metzger).

In writing *Hiroshima*, I chose to pit narrative against counter-narrative and to avoid as much as possible the “natural” tendency toward presentism. Historical thinking is an “unnatural” act because engaging with the past on its own terms can feel strange and

difficult for us in the present (Wineburg, 2001). Unlike many of the “patriotic” propaganda World War II movies of the past that had the American good guys defeat the Japanese bad guys, *Hiroshima* attempts, and hopefully achieves, an historical context narrative.

I used several story devices in striving to create an historical context. The lead characters speak both English and Japanese. They both have traveled to other’s country before Pearl Harbor and consequently have an appreciation for the other’s cultural heritage, customs and traditions. Both had their closest family member perish at Pearl Harbor. Although the Japanese did attack Pearl Harbor, the Americans rounded up tens of thousands of Japanese-Americans and incarcerated them in “War Relocation Centers.”

I did not whitewash or censor the horrific scenes after the dropping of the A-bomb in order to portray the Americans as the evil bad guys. I included a simultaneous counter-narrative, showing the empathic main character about to be viciously tortured by a sadist Japanese military officer. It remains to be seen whether or not my intentions and efforts result in a produced, historically contextual film that unfolds in a well-told authentic story.

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