

Spring 4-14-2017

The Narrator, the Mute, and the Familiar: Configurations of Children in War Films

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**THE NARRATOR, THE MUTE, AND THE FAMILIAR:
CONFIGURATIONS OF CHILDREN IN WAR FILMS**

by

KIYOMI WILKS

**BACHELOR OF THE ARTS, CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL
THEORY AND SPANISH & LATIN AMERICAN STUDIES**

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Master of Arts
Comparative Literature & Cultural Studies**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2017

For Damian

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not have been possible without my mentor and committee chair, Rajeshwari Vallury for encouraging me through the many iterations of this thesis and for the incredible generosity with which she has shared her time and knowledge with me. Raji's profound engagement with the relationship between film, politics, and cultural ethos has been a profound inspiration.

I would also like to thank Susanne Baackmann, my second reader, who agreed to help with my thesis without ever having met me. Her kind words and continued questioning of the arguments I take for granted have been invaluable to me.

I never would have thought to begin studies in childhood or trauma if it weren't for my third reader, Adrian Johnston, who introduced me to Lacan and completely redefined my relationship with Freud. Adrian's class in my first semester of graduate school invigorated me and introduced me to psychoanalysis in a fashion that was as compelling as it was insightful.

And finally, to Damian and to my father, whose love, questions, encouragements, and support through my successes and stalling points, both personal and academic, have sustained and inspired me.

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2017**

ABSTRACT

This thesis undertakes the examination of how and why children often figure prominently in films about war. Rather than accept the common argument that innocence is what makes children compelling as victims and objects of observation, this thesis argues that children in war films subvert dominant narratives about war and victimhood by asking questions that pierce through accepted narratives, revealing the child as an agent in possession of an adult knowledge that seems to run contrary to attempts to display the child as a naive innocent. The children in the three movies under examination-- *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) by Victor Erice, *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) by Isao Takahata, and *Beasts of No Nation* (2015) by Cary Fukunaga-- appear in configurations of a Narrator (usually the older child) who articulates familiar experiences of war, a Mute (usually the younger child) whose silences and questions shatter the Narrator's narrative, and the Familiar, an object or figure that exists within the filmic world as well as the world of the viewer, carrying different significances in each as the principal subject of the Mute's disruptive question(s).

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Introduction

Projections of Childhood Innocence

My thesis begins with the question: why are children so frequently used as protagonists in war films? A common explanation for this phenomenon is that children are innocent and helpless, and thus perfect representatives of the victims of war. It is certainly for such reasons that children often become tools of powerful propaganda for and against war. Such rhetoric was plainly at work in President Barack Obama's "Remarks... in Address to the Nation on Syria" in September of 2013. In this speech the President repeatedly refers to images of child victims of chemical attacks in Damascus as a call to action for the mobilization of American strikes targeting the Assad regime. To emphasize the horror of the situation, Obama refers to "A father clutching his dead children, imploring them to get up and walk" and later demands: "To my friends on the left, I ask you to reconcile your belief in freedom and dignity for all people with those images of children writhing in pain, and going still on a cold hospital floor" (Obama 2013). While over a thousand people were killed in these attacks, Obama is careful to repeatedly reference "children... being gassed to death" (Obama 2013) as a primary call to action. The deaths of children were perceived as more shocking and heinous than those of adults fighting in the war or getting caught in the crossfire.

Both Kathy Merlock Jackson and Lee Edelman point to the important place children play in American rhetoric. In *Images of Children in American Film* Merlock Jackson traces the ways that children in American film represent national anxieties and hopes for the future (8), from the self-reliant innocent child of the Great Depression era to

the fix-it child of the suffering victimized child and monstrous child of post-World War II films. In *No Future* Lee Edelman acknowledges a similar phenomenon in political rhetoric wherein political arguments are framed in terms of the safety and wellbeing of children. By framing arguments in terms of the protection of children, said arguments become irreproachable lest the critic be seen as uninterested in protecting the most vulnerable and precious members of society--those that will carry the nation into the future.

The use of children in political rhetoric is not unique to the modern moment. In his introduction to the *Children's Culture Reader*, Henry Jenkins provides an overview of how depictions of the innocent child have been mobilized in American politics. Jenkins complicates and questions the role of children as desexualized innocents who must be protected. Jenkins asserts, "Our modern conception of the innocent child presumes its universality across historical periods and across widely divergent cultures. The presocialized child exists in a state of nature.... the innocent child is a myth, in Roland Barthes's sense of the word, a figure that transforms culture into nature" (Jenkins 15). In part, Jenkins' work is critical because he draws attention to the potential symbolic value of a child outside of the Western matrix of innocent, docile bodies that exist to serve as examples and to stand in contrast to the sins of adulthood. Jenkins deconstructs the ways in which children are used to drive political and ideological agendas, parsing the characteristics attributed to children as figures. In this way, Jenkins illustrates spaces of possibility for children to exist in a more complex manner than is necessarily depicted in the Western matrix of innocence.

James Kincaid shares with Jenkins and Edelman a mistrust of the category of the innocent child. In his work on pedophilia in Victorian culture Kincaid argues that such a categorization is not only limiting of children's potential and agency, it is also a symptom of the fetishization of children as objects of adult desire. Kincaid criticizes the polarizing tendencies of Foucauldian analysis, stating that the division into dominant discourse and reverse-discourse/counter-discourse creates a reactive ideology such that resounding rejection of child-loving comes as a result of a deep-seated desire for children (though not always in a sexual way). Kincaid's work is deeply influenced by Sigmund Freud's theories on early childhood.

In opposition to the projection of innocence as the quality of being untainted by worldly experience and thus somewhat resistant to impurity, psychoanalytic theory offers an image of the infant and child as innocent insofar as it is new and un-socialized (as Jenkins notes in the above-quoted text). It is not that children are ignorant to the drama of interpersonal relationships and the threats of harm and dissatisfaction. Rather, as Freud and Lacan assert, prolonged infantile helplessness leads children to become intimately aware of the dependence of their existence on their early significant other (generally the mother). Periods of hunger, of discomfort, etc. teach the child first to imagine satiety and comfort in order to self-soothe, and then to come to terms with his inability to furnish himself completely with satisfaction. Unable to provide for himself, the infant is forced to interpret and to attempt to emulate that which the primary caretaker (the first Other) desires so as to ensure his continued importance and nurture. Keyed into the (m)other's psyche, the child may be considered to act as a barometer for her unconscious behaviors and wishes. In this way, the child is born into an environment that is already fraught with

tensions arising from family history (in the form of parental behaviors and neuroses). What's more, key elements of the child's psyche may be formed in response to misinterpretations of what it is that the mother wants. The potential for such misinterpretations abounds in families under the shadow of traumatic experiences.

In "Ghosts in the Nursery" Selma Fraiberg et al. present a poetic and profound assessment of the effects of childhood trauma on one's ability to parent and to interact with the present. The authors of the article delve into what it means to manage one's past and one's family's past and how such attempts manifest in behaviors in the present. For Fraiberg, the "ghosts" of the nursery are echoes of the parents' past that, if not managed properly, make their way into the rearing of their child in often unconscious, harmful ways. Typically ghosts get paired with concepts of exorcism or banishment, but Fraiberg offers a much more complex response: attempting to banish one's ghosts is what causes one to be possessed by them. Repressing trauma results in trauma manifesting itself in stealthy, unconscious ways. Ordinarily, in a healthy family, Fraiberg argues:

The baby makes his own imperative claim upon parental love and, in strict analogy with the fairy tales, the bonds of love protect the child and his parents against the intruders, the malevolent ghosts. This is not to say that ghosts cannot invent mischief from their burial places. Even among families where the love bonds are stable and strong, the intruders from the parental past may break through the magic circle in an unguarded moment, and a parent and his child may find themselves reenacting a moment or a scene from another time with another set of characters. Such events are unremarkable in the family theater... (Fraiberg 387)

The baby, as an imperative from the present, demands a certain banishment of the past, but the past and the present are often extensively intertwined in the unconscious. Thus the family theater often shows productions of familiar plays (traumatic and benign dramas from the parental past).

Childhood, Memory, and Narrative

What is mistaken as ignorance and is also often fetishized, is the propensity of children for devising (what are to adults fantastical) narratives that explain the turbulence of the outside world. Authors such as Donald Haase have devoted much energy to analyzing the use of fairytales by children in the interpretation of war. In "Children, War, and the Imaginative Space of Fairytales" Donald Haase offers a critical investigation of narratives of exile and the search for homes on new planes in the writings of survivors of childhood war-trauma. He examines the use of memoirs of childhood and the incorporation of fairytales into memoirs set in war-time to reinterpret scenes of devastation in familiar settings and to find home and the familiar not as the same, but as re-settled and re-imagined in the aftereffects of war. He is especially interested in the way that these imagined landscapes are revisited and interpreted by the adults who imagined them as children. However, while Haase draws attention to an interesting phenomenon, he fails to address the necessarily revisionist nature of memoirs narrating childhood in war. Memoirs of childhood by their very nature are viewed through the lens of adult repression in the form of the inevitable revision involved in the act of recollection and attempts to make confusing and traumatic events fit into a coherent structure.

Recollecting memories of childhood is the process of narrating glimpses of affective memory and experience and of creating a narrative for them, domesticating them and removing their affective claws. To create a coherent narrative surrounding events that were understood with the logic of childhood and that are necessarily laden with the affective coding of the Freudian unconscious is not unlike attempting to verbalize a muddled dream. According to the Freudian/Lacanian sensibility, the conscious mediates experience and enables one to look away, while it is the unconscious that behaves like an unblinking eye, taking in experiences and interpreting and connecting them behind the scenes. The adult's vision of the child, especially her own childhood as such, is mediated by the unconscious connections made between memories that do not always follow logical or sequential order. The result of these mixed modes of understanding is a complex tension between conscious memory and an unconscious, affective manipulation of sutured memory that causes meaning to arise from the juxtaposition of emotions and slivers of memory removed from their original context. In film especially, as Kaja Silverman has shown, memory can be sutured together in order to engage the viewer's unconscious interpretations of its sometimes-contradictory dynamics. The process of viewing childhood in the charged circumstances of war that may affect the viewer on a personal level confuses time, condensing the present and the past into the same mental space and thus summoning Fraibergian ghosts of historical trauma with which both the characters and the spectators need to contend. The typically overlooked remnants of past conflicts in the present become magnified and glaring when the viewer is confronted with the filmic child's process of discovering and interpreting war.

Unlike Haase, Karen Lury offers an in-depth exploration that takes into consideration the uniqueness of the temporal space that the presence of children creates in film. Lury reconsiders the way in which children interact with time in cinema and their disruptive relationship to narrative:

...the presence of the child allows film-makers to reflect on what can and cannot be said and to create filmic worlds in which the child's perspective is orchestrated via the representation of different embodied encounters and the adoption of an alternate mythic temporality, specifically the 'once upon a time' of the fairytale. I am interested in the way in which the child must work with and against their imperfect ability to speak of their experience. (Lury 6)

Lury's identification of the tense relationship between children and silence or broken speech in cinema constitutes the true springboard for my project (particularly in the character of the Mute, introduced below). Film is a medium uniquely suited to capitalize on the otherness of children that Lury highlights. The silent child in literature, like Pearl from *The Scarlet Letter*, often straddles the border of the uncanny. I believe this is in part because it is impossible for the reader to constantly track a child's action in such situations. The child often seems to exist only when directly mentioned, her existence not strong enough to carry weight when not directly inscribed on the page. The slippery nature of the child's presence combined with her lack of spoken communication gives her a spectral quality. Though the author may note key body movements and behaviors on the part of the child, the muteness of the child can take on an ominous, even haunting presence within the novel. Children brought under the observation of the camera (both animated and real) have the capacity for agency within their silences. The silent child of

cinema can still enunciate fascination and horror, can punctuate their verbal speech with body movement, and, as a result, can communicate in the unnerving language of image. Unlike the adult in film who is expected to communicate in civilized and logical ways, the child in film acts as a hub for a different mode of thinking and processing--a mode that, like the unconscious, does not always acknowledge contradictions and that is at home in the field of images saturated with meanings that are rarely articulated fully. Part of the power of the filmic child comes from the ability of the camera to emulate the child's perspective and to encourage the viewer to follow the child's gaze. Such is certainly the case in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, one of the three movies under examination in this project. The careful attention of the camera enables the filmmaker to capture the slipperiness of narrative that is told in the tensions between images (a la montage or suture) and instances of eruptive speech.

My thesis centers on the unique role of children in war films as shattering forces that split open familiar moments in history and sites of violence. The three films that form its subject matter all use pairs of children in wartime settings in order to create narratives about war (the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and a civil war in an undisclosed African country) and to shatter the viewer's familiarity and complacency with historical violence: *El espíritu de la colmena/The Spirit of the Beehive* (Dir. Victor Erice, 1973), *Hotaru no Haka/Grave of the Fireflies* (Dir. Takahata Isao¹, 1988), and *Beasts of No Nation* (Dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, 2015).

War films, like memoirs, are complicated by their relationship to familiar (and family) histories and experiences. They do not exist in fictive bubbles or in innocuous

¹ Takahata Isao's name is listed with his last name preceding his first name out of deference to Japanese name conventions.

glimpses of reality. Rather, they are set in events that are deeply charged in the imaginations of individuals and the collective identities of nations. All of this to say that the events of wars such as the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the multitudes of civil wars in Africa are generally familiar to those who watch films about them. Wars function as settings similar to fairytales for many audiences. The tragedies, the horrors, the courage of soldiers and civilians on both sides of the conflicts, these are deeply moving but not necessarily shocking. War is a familiar story; its tragedies are increasingly publicized (even fetishized). The outcome of historical wars is typically understood and established in an accepted narrative. What makes the films at the heart of this project effective is the way in which they use children to shatter the viewer's sense of complacent familiarity and authoritative knowledge of the past.

The three films I analyze share a cast of character relationships, the primary relationship being between two children (generally siblings), one of whom occupies the place of the Narrator, the other of whom plays the role of the Mute (both roles to be further discussed below), or that which declines to settle into narrative and become knowable. Together these pairs of children emulate the single consciousness of the wartime survivor and of the viewer who is, perhaps, unaware of the echoes of wartime present in his or her own life. The Narrator plays the point of identification for the viewer, acting as the speaker with authority who experiences the war in a familiar way. The Mute, by unseating traditional narrative and piercing the structures of power for both the Narrator and the viewer, shatters the existing hegemony of adult narratives of history and asserts a new paradigm through her relationship with the Familiar. In piercing through multiple temporalities (the diegetic time of the film, the historical moment, and

the viewer's present) via the act of questioning and reimagining the Familiar, the Mute throws aside the notion of viewing from a safe distance, casting light on the larger world of the film, and also on the experience (personal and historical) of the viewer.

War films, especially the three that I focus on in my thesis, reject the notion of the universal Western child, or the child as ignorant innocent. In its place, these films portray pairs of children in a multivalent fashion, such that the children represent the known facts of history while simultaneously unseating comfortable, easy understandings of war that locate the phenomenon within a stable, isolated temporality. My thesis aims to unseat common, disempowering notions of childhood innocence and to uncover the subversive, disquieting, multivalent agency that children display in films about war. Rather than offer a commentary on the lives of modern children, my analysis examines the profound relationship between filmic portrayals of children in war, the cinematic strategies of the directors who employ these characters as devices, and the audience that bears witness to the struggles of said children. In the place of a cursory, pacifying understanding of children in films as ideal empathic fulcrums and wellsprings of affect, I investigate the unnerving ability of filmic children to observe the world and to draw profound insights about what they have borne witness to. The penetrating gaze of the child in war films and the insights gleaned by the audience based on the connections between images seen from the child's view have the unique power to frame the familiar in disconcerting ways. This violation of traditional understandings of war, victimhood, and innocence by the children in the three films under investigation creates a space of possibility for the viewer, like the parents in Fraiberg's study, to understand the elements of tragedy and violence depicted in the past that still permeate the present moment.

The Narrator

As mentioned above, the Narrator functions as the primary point of identification for the viewer. The viewer forms an empathic relationship with the Narrator and through this connection, gains a sense of familiarity and intimacy with the world that the Narrator depicts, no matter how terrifying and threatening, because the narrator makes the world knowable and thus accessible. This tamed version of the world gives the viewer an illusion of mastery insofar as the viewer is situated on the side of a guide who has hegemonic ability to speak the "truth." The Narrator is often situated in the role of the memoirist, telling the story from a point in the future. The Narrator is uniquely suited to act as an entry point for the viewer because s/he exists at once as an object of the film's present (a figure in the events that the viewer watches transpire) and an occupant of the viewer's present (a narrator who exists after the events of the film and has the shared ability with the viewer to recall the War or its effects). In *Grave of the Fireflies* Seita acts as the Narrator and his first lines establish his control of the story and his authority: "September 21, 1945--that was the night I died." Upon delivering these lines, Seita moves his gaze away from the audience, towards the murky background. His gaze populates the scene with architectural details and figures that give the location specificity and make it identifiable. In this way the viewer knows that Seita is in charge of unfolding the story and that his perception will function as the viewer's reality.

In *Beasts of No Nation* Agu seems at first to be telling his story as it unfolds, but the tinge of nostalgia with which he introduces his family indicates to the viewer that this is perhaps a reflection, rather than a stream of consciousness. Like Seita, Agu narrates the

entirety of the story. The narration could be retrospective or concurrent with the events of the film, and this is part of its power. Should the story being told be a reflection on the past (as is implied at the end of the film by Agu's situation in the child soldier recovery camp and a scene shot of him with a therapist), the entanglement of past and present is a powerful representation of the way in which the trauma of the war affects Agu's psyche.

The Spirit of the Beehive is the outlier in terms of its Narrator. The film relies on an intertitle at the beginning of the movie to place the events in time and space. Vital information about the political situation and the relation of the film to the historical moment it occupies is dependent upon a letter written and narrated by Ana's mother, the frustrated attempts of Ana's father to narrate the allegorical workings of the nation of Spain, and the appearance of the Rebel in the cottage that Ana visits. Ana herself is almost entirely silent, but it is her gaze that the camera follows. Ana's family, in particular her sister Isabel, functions as a verbal narrator while Ana's gaze is the visual narrator. In this way, Ana is an example of the Narrator and the Mute at work within the same character, where her vision is often in conflict with the order-establishing words of her family.

Configurations of the Narrator rely on an understanding of the complicated relationship between the adult and attempts at recalling and mastering childhood. My concept of the Narrator derives in part from Donald Haase's above-mentioned construction of the memoirist's relation to their childhood experiences of war. Though extensive study has been devoted to the roles of narrators in fiction and film, the Narrators in the films under examination in this thesis occupy uniquely subversive positions as children on the verge of adulthood who at once verbalize and occlude the

horrors of war around them. The Narrator offers a tantalizing taste of linguistic mastery over experience, describing the world around them and attempting to bring the hidden world of childhood to light. The Narrator is, in many ways, an envoy of the Lacanian symbolic order, editing experience into language and relaying the significance of these experiences and declarations to his companion, the Mute. The Narrator frames the position of the Familiar in relation to the Mute and the viewer. However, neither Erice nor Takahata nor Fukunaga accept the facile fantasy of individual mastery over memory or narrative, inserting instead the Mute as a disquieting agent that undermines the Narrator's authoritative speech and reconfigures the viewer's understanding of the Familiar.

The Mute

The Mute has the power of illumination and redefinition. The Mute makes the recognizable and familiar into something strange and other via her questions or noncompliance, creates a new discourse out of the subversive spaces she creates around the Narrator's claims. Through this reconfiguration of the familiar, the Mute overturns the Narrator's and viewer's complacent acceptance of the former's world.

My understanding of the Mute comes from Lury's above-mentioned framework for the cinematic child who intertwines bodily presence and gestures with broken language or silence. While the Narrator retains a literary quality, the Mute is truly a product of cinematic language. In *Elusive Childhood*, Susan Honeyman interrogates the circumscribed roles of children in literature, who are often simplified or silenced to avoid recognition of their strangeness. Honeyman is attentive to children as pre-linguistic

subjects--individuals who may use language haltingly or not at all and thus are unable to communicate in a way that is wholly intelligible to adults. Thus, in order to be heard and avoid the colonization of their words and agency by adults (well-meaning and otherwise) children are forced to turn to the medium of questions in order to be heard. Like Honeyman's literary children, the Mute is not at home in the realm of language and relies on questions or silence, but unlike Honeyman's children, the Mute has the language of the gaze and of bodily performance. Through the use of shot-reverse shot techniques and point-of-view shots, as well as framing techniques that situate children starkly in contrast with adults (the latter technique is particularly prominent in the animated *Grave of the Fireflies*) the directors of the films under discussion in this thesis subvert the notion that silence is equivalent to complacency or ignorance.

The Mute accompanies the Narrator as a close companion (siblings in *The Spirit of the Beehive* and *Grave of the Fireflies*; brothers in arms in *Beasts of No Nation*) and in all but the last of the aforementioned films the Mute is also younger than her Narrator and as such seems to be the true innocent companion to her Narrator. The Mute, especially in the beginning, confirms the Narrator's depiction of the world. This is what makes the Mute's questions and silences so shattering - they indicate the presence of a narrative or knowing gaze that runs counter to the Narrator's stabilizing story. Just as the viewer begins to feel comfortable in "understanding" the trauma of the war as relayed to them, as well as the world of the narrating child, the Mute asks a question or reframes a statement in such a way that the stability of the Narrator's world (and thus that of the viewer) is shattered.

The Mute draws the viewer's attention to aspects of the film that penetrate through the veneer of order and of firmly separated time (the past as clearly divided from the present, like a memory), revealing the way in which the more terrifying aspects of the war depicted by the film still haunt the viewer's present. The Mute is firmly situated within the temporality of the story told by the Narrator - he or she is, in fact, often trapped in the past by the events of the film. Both Setsuko (*Grave of the Fireflies*) and Strika (*Beasts of No Nation*) die before their respective films end and the Narrator's conclusion, making it impossible for them to step into the "present", and the viewer never sees Ana recover from her voyage into the realm of Frankenstein's Monster (the Familiar) in *The Spirit of the Beehive*. Yet, in the Mute's interaction with the past, her questions pertaining to the Familiar and to the Narrator's portrayal of reality pierce through the aforementioned disparate temporalities, thereby fracturing the stability of the Narrator's control. These questions have a shattering effect because they indicate perceptiveness and an understanding of the situation on the part of the Mute to which the narrator (and by extension the viewer) were not privy, thereby destabilizing and rupturing the narrative. In doing so, the Mute also shatters the viewer's power of separation as voyeur.

Because of the way in which the Mute connects aspects of the Familiar to both the viewer's present and to the past, the character of the Mute is conceived of in a psychoanalytic framework that relies on theories of the functions of the unconscious and of the return of the repressed. Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* provides vital frameworks for understanding and interpreting the language of image that is the Mute's primary mode of communication. The Mute is emblematic of the return of the repressed for both the Narrator and the viewer. The Mute functions as a portal for Fraiberg's ghosts and as the

agent of the Uncanny (that which blends the *heimlich*/homely with the *unheimlich*/unhomely). Most powerfully, the Mute occupies the role of the Lacanian other, of memories of childhood that evade concrete order. The viewer sees the Mute as an other, but at the same time witnesses the Mute come to terms with her own Other -the Familiar. By appearing knowable and at the same time evading concrete categorization and understanding, the Familiar functions as a constantly shifting position between the known and the unknown. These others are the creatures that one attempts to discern and whose needs one must interpret as a child in order to survive. It is from them that one gains an understanding of one's place in the family theater. To return to Fraiberg, the child must determine whether the mother sees it as a disturbing ghost or as something to be loved. In watching this family theater and, in a sense, participating in its creation, the viewer must learn to understand what she wants from the Narrator's story and what she stands to gain (and lose) by engaging with the Mute.

The Familiar

The Mute's question is powerful because it is directly linked to something that the Narrator (and the viewer) believes he knows- the Familiar. The Familiar is a being that is introduced to the Mute at the same time as it is introduced to the viewer. Its relationship to the Mute and the Narrator is thereby documented in its entirety. As well, the Familiar must be an entity about which the viewer knows something prior to its introduction-- Frankenstein's Monster (referred to by Ana as *el espiritu*) in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, the fireflies in *Grave of the Fireflies*, and the child soldier in *Beasts of No Nation*. Because the Familiar is a known entity to the viewer, the Familiar acts as a zone of indistinction

between the viewer and the world of the film, blurring the lines between the Mute's relationship to the Familiar and the affective relationship built between the viewer and the Familiar.

Though the Familiar has a concrete visual form in all three of the movies under analysis, the Familiar is not so much a character distinct from the Narrator and the Mute as a visualization of tensions between the Narrator and the Mute and between the Mute and the viewer. Rather than operate as a concrete figure, the Familiar embodies a moment of surplus insight where the Mute's question overturns the Narrator's or viewer's previously presumed mastery over the film. This excess insight that characterizes the Familiar is often visually represented by a re-viewing of the Familiar: in *The Spirit of the Beehive* Ana sees the Familiar as the Monster wearing her father's face beneath his scars; in *Grave of the Fireflies* Setsuko asks her question in the context of the dull, dead bodies of the fireflies; in *Beasts of No Nation* Agu, previously the source of Narrative insight, takes up Strika's mantle of silence.

Because the Familiar is at once a part of the filmic world and the world of the viewer, it often takes on an uncanny quality. Caught between the viewer's expectations and associations and the rules laid out by the occupants of the film, the Familiar is never fully settled, its meaning never entirely clear. Just as it blends the filmic world and extra-filmic world, the Familiar acts as a key to decoding the Mute's questions and interactions with the world. The Mute communicates in a manner that is primarily non-verbal and overturns the seemingly settled meanings of words, but her queries and silent interactions would often be rendered unintelligible were it not for the Familiar. The Familiar acts as a ground of shared meaning that allows the Mute to communicate with the viewer. The

Familiar, like the Lacanian register of the Real, is marked by a seemingly irrefutable presence that marks one's interactions with the world. At the same time, it is inaccessible, out of the reach of language and the wills of the subjects that seek it (Johnston). In pursuing the Familiar as a seat of meaning and significance, the viewer, the Mute, and the Narrator are all swept into a quixotic quest for a comfortingly concrete signification that cannot be fully realized. At the same time as the Familiar helps to make the Mute intelligible, it also, through its tripartite relationship to the Mute, the Narrator, and the viewer, throws preconceived interpretations into chaos.

Ana's questions pertain to Frankenstein's Monster: "Why did he [the Monster] kill the girl?" and "Why did they [the villagers] kill him [the Monster]?", while Setsuko's question bears upon the fireflies in which Seita had helped her find comfort: "Why do they die so soon?" The Narrator is left to either pretend to know the answer to the inquiry or to face fracture in his or her narrative. Such, at least, is the case in *The Spirit of the Beehive* and *Grave of the Fireflies*. *Beasts of No Nation* complicates the relationship of the Narrator to the Mute. In *Beasts of No Nation* the Mute, Strika, truly refuses to speak. His queries come in the form of silence, his creature of familiarity is Agu the Narrator, whose self becomes fractured into the part that narrates and the part that acts and sees. Even more than complicate the relationship between Narrator and Mute, however, *Beasts of No Nation* destabilizes the viewer's ability to separate herself from the film. If *The Spirit of the Beehive* is illustrative of the hidden, internalized war and *Grave of the Fireflies* portrays the war that is frozen in time, haunting the past and the present in reflections and echoes, then *Beasts of No Nation* represents the sleepless war that lives

within its participants, transforming notions of safety into disquieting sites of ideological warfare.

The Familiar blurs the line between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, between the unconscious connections made by the child as represented by the Mute and the realm of law and dictated history of the adult represented by the Narrator. In many ways, the Familiar is akin to the ghost or interloper from Fraiberg's essay insofar as it is neither fully of the past or the present, the filmic world or the world of the viewer. However, rather than delegating the authority for the management of the ghost to the adult, in this configuration, it is the child who must determine whether to pursue the Familiar in its pre-re-viewing form into a realm of fantasy and regression or to acknowledge the insight that the re-viewed Familiar represents and to internalize the questions left in the wake of its passage. In the same way, the viewer must decide whether to recognize the implications of the questions raised by the Familiar and Mute on the world the viewer occupies or to dismiss the repressed ghosts of war that occupy the world beyond the film.

Chapter I

The Hidden War, the Mute, and the Monster: Censorship, Silence, and Distance in *The Spirit of the Beehive*

Introduction

The Spirit of the Beehive follows a family of four living "[s]omewhere on the Castilian plain around 1940" in the small village of Hoyuelos". The film's protagonist, six-year-old Ana, spends her days with her older sister Isabel wandering the village, attending school, and carefully observing the world around her. Unlike what the film shows of her contemporaries, Ana is a very quiet child. She speaks rarely but seems always to be intently engaged in observing the world around her. When the cinema comes to Hoyuelos showing *Frankenstein*, Ana becomes fixated on the character of the Monster. After being informed by Isabel that the Monster lives in a casita on the outskirts of the village, Ana becomes determined to find and befriend him. On one of her visits to the casita, she stumbles upon a fugitive soldier who has taken refuge in the little hut. No words are exchanged between the two, but Ana offers him her lunch and later returns with her father's jacket (containing his pocket watch) and shoes and treats his wound. However, word gets out of the soldier's presence and he is shot to death in the casita. When Ana sees her father has his pocket watch back she knows that something has happened to her soldier. She hurries to the hut to find a bloodstain where he sat. Her father follows her, but when confronted by her father outside of the hut Ana runs away, spending a haunted night alone in the woods. When her father and the other villagers find

her in the morning she is a changed girl, not eating or drinking and avoiding the light. The film ends without Ana clearly recovering from her venture.

Unlike the other films under examination in this thesis, Victor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* lacks a clear Narrator or string of narrative organization that allows the viewer to immerse herself in the film. This style of storytelling that unfolds without explanation or direct communication with the viewer is a marked departure from standards of dealing with child protagonists in war films. The other two films under analysis (*Grave of the Fireflies* and *Beasts of No Nation*) follow conventional norms of depiction, whereby the viewer is encouraged to identify with the voice or perspective of a child (the Narrator) and to interpret the horrors of war as the child does. In this way, the child is made known to the viewer, and the structures that the child applies through language enable the viewer to safely enter the world of the film. The viewer gains a sense of what type of child she is dealing with, and in such perceived mastery or understanding of the film's protagonist, the viewer gains the ability to categorize her experience of the film. As Henry Jenkins reflects in his introduction to *The Children's Culture Reader*, "The myth of childhood innocence, as James Kincaid notes, 'empties' the child of its own political agency, so that it may more perfectly fulfill the symbolic demands we make upon it" (1). The Western child exists as a vessel always ready to be filled with meaning by adults. The innocent child itself is not a naturally existing formation, but rather an archetype that was shaped and created by Western political rhetoric about home, family, and morality. Discussing Stevens Heininger, Jenkins is quick to point out that "...the discourse of childhood innocence has historically provided powerful tools for criticizing the 'vicious, materialistic, and immoral qualities of American society.' The horrors of

modernity are magnified through children's innocent eyes. Children serve as 'soft and smiling foils to a more grim and grownup reality'" (9). Filmmakers do little to break with cultural precedents, standing to elicit greater audience engagement by using a child protagonist to depict the horrors of war. By showing an 'innocent' child attempting to understand war, the filmmaker authorizes the viewer to experience and unravel the war using the Narrator as proxy. This encourages emotional identification on the part of the viewer while at the same time allowing the viewer a sense of safety insofar as they 'know' the Narrator and accept his story. In the absence of a Narrator, *The Spirit of the Beehive* leaves the viewer, like the protagonist, Ana, to sort the contents of the film into understandable narrative.

Erice's film, released in 1973, has no clear Narrator to guide the spectator's perspective. *The Spirit of the Beehive* is truly the Mute's film, dominated by silence, empty space, and distance. Contrary to popular cinema that favors a "seamless" camera style that hides the presence of the camera in order to create the illusion that the viewer is either in the room with the characters or seeing from their perspectives, the viewer of *The Spirit of the Beehive* is rarely able to forget that he is, in fact, a spectator. Jean-Louis Baudry has described the cinema as an apparatus that, like Freud's configuration of dreams, is directly linked with the unconscious. Baudry argues:

"... the cinematographic apparatus brings about a state of artificial regression. It artificially leads back to an anterior phase of his [the spectator's] development.... It is the desire, unrecognized as such by the subject, to return to this phase, an early state of development with its own forms of satisfaction which may play a determining role in his desire for cinema and the pleasure he finds in it. Return

toward a relative narcissism, and even more toward a mode of relating to reality which could be defined as enveloping and in which the separation between one's own body and the exterior world is not well defined" ("The Apparatus..." 219).

In this artificially induced, infantile state of narcissism, the camera anticipates the spectator's desires, zooming closer and panning back in an intuitive manner. By immersing the spectator in himself, the film also causes the viewer to forget himself. The viewer nearly returns to a stage where he has not experienced symbolic castration, creating a sense of oneness with- and power over the film. Erice's film operates in the opposite fashion. He constantly reminds the viewer that she is on the outside of the film looking in through a variety of cinematic mechanisms, including but not limited to his protracted still shots of occupied buildings from empty streets. This constant reminder of the spectator's status on the outside of the film without a Narrator as guide forces the viewer to bring her own contextual understandings and interpretations to the film. The viewer, like a child, must use what incomplete fragments of filmic narrative and outside knowledge are available to her in order to engage in the film via interpretation. Such forced participation from the viewer is a brilliant way of communicating the devastation of war and Fascism while working around the Franco era censorship enforced at the time of the film's release (Miles 196). It continues to offer a profound way of circumnavigating the self-censorship of repression and trauma in viewers watching the film generations after the Spanish Civil War. However, such a connection between the spectator and the film is not formed spontaneously. Rather, it is the intervention of the filmic Familiar that facilitates the overlay of the spectator's world with the filmic world.

The Familiar functions as a homing beacon, beckoning viewer and characters alike to a common space, moment, or figure. It is, in essence, a quotation that is both diegetic and extra-filmic, which serves to bind the characters of the film and the spectator to a common axis. This is not to say that visual quotation carries the same connotations for the viewer and for the characters within the film, but the Familiar, as a locus of collection of a shared lexicon of signs and significations, allows for interpretation and meaning from within and without the film to touch each other and interact. The result of this interaction is not always comfortable because it removes the emotional barrier between the viewer and the film, leaving the viewer "exposed" to the same threats as the Mute and/or the Narrator, drawing perceived dangers out of the film and into the present of the viewer. In films where a clear Narrator exists, the viewer's distress at the destruction of distancing mechanisms is mirrored by the Narrator's distress at the destruction of his narrative, which was meant to tame and make manageable the circumstances outside of his control. However, there is no such clear mirror or foil for the viewer in *The Spirit of the Beehive*. As such, the viewer is left with a sense of indeterminacy in the final scene of the film. The viewer cannot look to a single character to find a new narrative formed with the inclusion of the Mute's interjections and illuminations regarding the Narrator's original story because such starting narratives are themselves incomplete and originate at least in part with the spectator. The final scene of *The Spirit of the Beehive* intentionally quotes earlier an earlier monologue from the film rather than a voiceover by Ana in order to force the viewer to contend with her own relationship to the war depicted in the film.

Throughout the beginning of the film Erice persistently incorporates sound clips from *Frankenstein* into quotidian moments in Fernando's life. These clips, such as Victor Frankenstein's explanation for his need to create the Monster, put Fernando in tension with *Frankenstein*, where the viewer is unsure if Fernando is more aligned with the Monster, created by ego and ambition, or with Frankenstein himself. Fernando is rendered unable to fully articulate his perception of the world he inhabits, trapped instead in a cycle of returning to his allegory (detailed on page 30) as a site of incomplete incorporation of the present he inhabits into himself. The first shot of Fernando has him wearing a beekeeper's suit; the mesh mask obscuring his face renders him bizarre and off-putting. Isabel will later use her father's beekeeping clothes to scare Ana, and when Ana hallucinates the Monster, she sees him wearing her father's face. What's more, when Isabel explains to Ana the properties of the Monster, who she claims is a spirit, Fernando's footsteps as he paces his study penetrate the scene, asserting the spectral presence of the father-Monster. Thus the opening of the film establishes the contemplative figure of the father as bound to the Familiar as Monster and also to the ambiguous figure of Dr. Frankenstein, the rogue creator. The knowledge of such intertwining of the Familiar with Ana's family as well as with her imagination proves vital in interpreting Ana's silences and questions.

The Two Types of Questions

As Susan Honeyman argues in *Elusive Childhood*, within a world dominated by adult discourse, children have the alarming power to derail and disrupt adults' "empowered discourse" by asking questions that ignore the complacent "common sense"

responses of adults (139). Two major types of questions guide the film. The first and most intimate questions come from Ana, who wants to understand why certain acts of violence are committed and what makes something good or bad, real or unreal. These questions that form the subject of the film go without definitive answers and constitute the ambiguity of the end of the film. The second type of question, the question that Isabel asks when she is alone, "Qué te pasa?"² has a deceptively clear answer, as the viewer is often witness to the actions leading up to the question. While Ana wants to understand the motivations behind the acts of violence, Isabel is more interested in the actions themselves and the acts of deceit she perceives and perpetrates. Unlike Ana, Isabel is secure in her knowledge of the difference between the real and the fake and in her ability to create realities for her sister out of her stories. The performances of death that she instigates (as enumerated below) draw her question out of the mouths of her sister and father.

Isabel's Question and the Performance of Death

Isabel first voices her question "Qué te pasa" in the context of sadistic play with the family cat. Alone in the room she shares with Ana, Isabel pulls the pet cat onto her bed. In what looks like typical child's play, she investigates the cat's ears and rubs his face against hers. However, without changing tone, Isabel leans over the cat and begins to strangle him, asking "Qué te pasa?" until he squeals and escapes, cutting Isabel's finger in the process. Isabel licks the blood from her finger and blows on it in a motion that echoes the way Ana blows on the bees in her father's mesh beehive. When the finger continues to

² "What happened to you?"

bleed, Isabel spreads it on her lips like lipstick as she peers into a doll-sized mirror. The camera captures the reflection of her lips and then captures Isabel staring intently at her newly hidden reflection, licking the blood off of her lips. While it is easy to read Isabel's question as a sociopathic mimicry of concern for the cat, another, deeper reading is also possible. Isabel performs an act of violence, but she releases the cat without struggle as soon as he yowls. She seems more interested in what the cat will consider to be too much to be borne. Given Isabel's immediate response to lick her wound and then look at her reflection, covered in her own blood, it is equally plausible that the question is directed inwards in a manner best understood through Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage.

Lacan's mirror stage details the time in an infant's life when he begins to perceive a separation between the world of the Imaginary where he conceives of his surroundings as part of himself and the register of the Real, where he exists in isolation, his survival contingent upon forces beyond his control. This stage of the child's awareness can be characterized by the way in which a child, in front of a mirror, misrecognizes his reflection as his true self, rather than recognizing himself as the caster of the reflection. The child sees his limbs moving with more organization and autonomy than he feels he holds over his limbs, and he fuses his self-image with this imagination of the better self. This mirror image, when bound to the signifiers that his parents use to define him ("smart," "handsome," "strong," etc.) forms the ego. Isabel, coming into adolescence in a time of subverted violence and in a world where she goes unnoticed by the adults who handed her signifiers, is unsure of what is happening to her or what she signifies in relation to others.

Isabel is the noisy child who speaks and giggles in class, who tells stories and invents tricks to play on her sister. However, despite her vivacious personality, Isabel seems to go largely unnoticed by her mother. Apart from her interaction with her father when searching for wild mushrooms (detailed below), Isabel rarely interacts with anyone besides Ana or seems noticed by her parents. Even her blonde hair and clothes leave her to blend into the sepia-toned colors of her large home, a contrast to Ana, whose dark hair and eyes are easily pinpointed in the over-bright rooms. Left on her own, Isabel contends with questions about entering into adulthood by experimenting with violence, acting out the tensions she sees in her examples of adult life. Isabel creates situations in which she can anticipate the need for her question, "Qué te pasa?" as well as the answer in order to understand and contend with her own agency (as adulthood and violence) in a world where she is rarely acknowledged. In this way, Isabel understands the world insofar as she has an effect on it.

The scene directly after Isabel's encounter with the cat opens on a painting hanging in Fernando's study. In the painting a philosopher gazing to the left, a demon occupies the space to his right, and before him is a book and a skull. The camera tracks from the philosopher's gaze in the left down to the demon, and down again to the book before settling on the skull, revealing Ana in front of the painting, playing on her father's typewriter. She hears a crash coming from somewhere in the house but is unconcerned and continues playing with the typewriter. However, a scream echoes through the house, causing Ana to calmly climb down from her father's chair and peer out the study door, leaving it slightly open behind her as she proceeds down the hall calling for her sister.

In another room Ana is greeted with the sight of Isabel sprawled on the floor besides a moving rocking chair placed before the open window and a broken potted plant on the ground. Unimpressed, Ana tells her sister to get up and stop playing. She rolls her sister over and lifts her hand, drops it, and watches Isabel's hand thump to the floor. Outside the open window a dog barks loudly. Seeming to decide that the dog is the reason Isabel refuses to get up, Ana crosses the floor and closes the window, speaking to her sister "He's not here anymore. He's gone. Isabel. Isabel." When Isabel still refuses to move, Ana checks for Isabel's heartbeat. The dog begins to bark again as Ana listens to her sister's chest, so Ana leans over her sister and whispers sweetly, "Isabel, dime qué te pasa³" and strokes her hair. Not quite convinced that Isabel isn't playing, Ana tries to trick her sister into getting up by leaving the room, closing the door, and then bursting in again a moment later. With no response to her final test, Ana runs in search of Milagros, the family maid.

Isabel is not, in fact, dead or injured, as she reveals when Ana returns after a fruitless search for Milagros to find Isabel's body gone. The shadows cast by the window reveal the doors are once again open and Ana checks outside, only to have Isabel scare her from behind wearing their father's jacket and gloves. These two scenes reveal critical tensions hidden beneath the surface of the film relating to Fernando. In the beginning of the film, Fernando's return home is marked by his dog's barking and eager greeting. When Ana finds Isabel on the floor and hears the dog, she assumes that Isabel is hiding from their father, not wanting to get in trouble for breaking the potted plant. When Isabel scares her sister, she does so with their father's clothes.

³ "Isabel, tell me what happened to you."

While Isabel, like a detective, tries to trace results backwards to their causes, Fernando is stuck in constant attempts to grasp at finality. Isabel, as a child at the tail end of the Spanish Civil War, experienced some of the violence and strife of the war, but she was not aware of the buildup. Fernando, on the other hand, is unable to find definite ends to actions, as exemplified by his fixation on his unfinished allegory:

Someone to whom I recently showed my glass beehive, with its movement like the main gear wheel of a clock... Someone who saw the constant agitation of the honeycomb, the mysterious, maddened commotion of the nurse bees over the nests, the teeming bridges and stairways of wax, the invading spirals of the queen, the endlessly varied and repetitive labors of the swarm, the relentless yet ineffectual toil, the fevered comings and goings, the call to sleep always ignored, undermining the next day's work, the final repose of death far from a place that tolerates neither sickness nor tombs... Someone who observed these things, after the initial astonishment had passed, quickly looked away with an expression of indescribable sadness and horror.

During the first voiceover of his allegory the camera crosscuts images of Fernando writing his allegory with images of the glass beehive and, as he moves to talk of "undermining the next day's work" and "the final repose of death," the camera cuts to a sleeping Isabel in the early morning. The following focus on the place that "tolerates neither sickness nor tombs" is spoken over a shot of a sleeping Ana. The camera captures conclusions that Fernando attempts to connect to the seemingly endless duration of action of his hive, positing an end that Fernando is unable to fully articulate or even to reach in his own writing. The incompleteness of Fernando's allegory lingers over the film not

unlike the narrative fragments of *Frankenstein* incorporated into the opening of the film, leaving the viewer to puzzle over what sadness and horror has rendered Fernando incapable of completely enunciating what shadow he sees lingering over himself and his family. Fernando and Isabel are at home with different ends of the same phenomena, and it is perhaps because of this that Isabel finds it so easy to follow her father's example when sorting and categorizing the mundane into definitive categories such as real/unreal, or good/bad.

While Isabel consistently discerns the difference between mushrooms that are good to eat and mushrooms that are poisonous, the mushrooms that Ana thinks would be best for eating are poisonous. In one scene, Isabel finds a large mushroom. When she calls her father over, Ana rushes to meet her and announces, "It's bad," to which Isabel challenges, "How much you wanna bet?" The mushroom is, in fact, a good mushroom. When prompted with what it is called, both girls get the wrong answer initially, but Ana guesses that it is a flyswatter mushroom, something that Fernando quickly reminds her is poisonous. In another scene the family crouches before a solitary mushroom. Fernando calls it "a real devil" but Ana can't help but whisper, "It smells so good." Fernando admonishes her, then warns: "Never forget girls: this is the worst of all, the most poisonous. Whoever eats this hasn't got a chance in the world." The camera shot-reverse shots between Ana's solemn face, her eyelids hiding her eyes as she looks down and Fernando's shoe as he smashes the mushroom beneath his toe and heel. Isabel's understanding that the mushroom is bad indicates to Fernando an end to her interaction with the mushroom; it is bad, therefore Isabel will not touch it. However, Fernando realizes that for Ana, who doesn't understand how to identify the mushroom's properties,

the identification of this mushroom at one point in time as bad will not stop her from stumbling on the same mushroom, as if new, and misidentifying it again. In an effort to eliminate such a possibility, Fernando forcibly draws Ana's relationship to the mushroom to a close. Like Sleeping Beauty's parents, who hasten to hide every spinning wheel in the kingdom in order to protect their daughter from her fate (and in doing so, make the spinning wheel an object of curiosity), Fernando's fear places Ana in a narrative of inevitability wherein she is destined to misidentify a mushroom and experience its poison.

Teresa's Absent Other & Ana's Questions

While Fernando takes his daughters on walks to find mushrooms, Teresa, their mother does not interact with her children so openly and her influence on her children is harder to parse. However, it is Teresa who sets the tone for the spectator early in the film, influencing their perception of events via her short narrative. In the beginning of the film, Teresa writes a letter to a former lover who is fighting in the war. This letter is invaluable as one of the only true pieces of narration in the film (the others being the clips of dialogue from *Frankenstein* and Fernando's allegory of the beehive). Teresa's letter is the only element of the film that concretely refers to the past and to the present. The opening lines set the tone for the bittersweet quality of the letter: "I pray that God grant me the joy of seeing you again. That's been my constant prayer ever since we parted during the war, and it's my prayer still here in this remote spot where Fernando and the girls and I try to survive."

While the countryside captured in the various long shots throughout the film often appears idyllic and the clamoring children who appear just minutes earlier in the film indicate a pastoral and pleasant existence, Teresa's letter paints a radically different picture: "...when I look around me and see so much loss, so much destruction and so much sadness, something tells me perhaps our ability to really feel life has vanished along with all the rest." Her letter resonates with the loss that is equally inscribed within the framework that Ana will recreate later in the film.

The opening lines of the letter referring to Teresa's prayers that she will see the nameless addressee of the letter again could easily describe Ana's behavior later in the film as she constantly searches for the Monster. Teresa also refers to an unspecified house, saying "Little but the walls are left of the house you once knew." At the moment of its introduction this line seems unimportant. However, it is likely that Teresa is referring to the broken down house where Ana goes in search of the Monster, the house where she later meets the fleeing soldier. Teresa's following line, "I often wonder what became of everything we had there," is nearly a prediction of the predicament that Ana will find herself in when she returns to the house to find a bloodstain where the soldier had previously rested.

While, upon revisiting by the viewer, Teresa's letter establishes clear ties between Ana and herself, and it is not the only site of overlap between Teresa and her youngest daughter. Teresa wraps herself in silence. She rarely addresses any other character out loud and seems to actively avoid interacting with her husband apart from two scenes, one where she shuts down Fernando's study while he sleeps over his work, removing his glasses and turning off the light, and the other where she calls his name and throws him

his hat from the second floor so that he can continue into town. When Fernando comes to join his wife in bed she closes her eyes and pretends to be asleep. Mirroring Teresa's withdrawal, the camera only shows evidence of Fernando's presence in the form of his shadow crossing the back wall and the shifting of weight on the bed. Though not as actively exclusive, Ana later puts on a similar performance when Isabel attempts to find out where Ana went when she left her bed in the middle of the night.

The only scenes where Teresa interacts with any member of her family take place between herself and Ana. The first scene shows Teresa brushing Ana's hair as the girl sits in her lap, preparing to leave for school. The two share an exchange about spirits, a subject that Isabel introduced when she assured Ana that the Monster wasn't dead because as a spirit, he could not be killed he is a spirit and spirits can't be killed. Ana asks her mother, "Mama, do you know what a spirit is?" When Teresa, holding a bobby pin with her mouth, fails to answer Ana is quick to leap in, "You don't and I do." Teresa replies, "A spirit is a spirit." Her answer triggers another question from Ana "Are they good or bad?" Teresa's teasing answer, that it depends on what kind of little girl the spirit is appearing to, seems to satisfy her daughter, who runs out the door with her sister. A few scenes later (after Ana once again visits the abandoned house in search of the Monster) Ana is looking at photos while, in another room, Teresa stands and plays the piano. Ana goes through a multitude of photos of her mother and a young, dark-haired man. She pauses on a picture of her mother as a young woman and reads the inscription on the back out loud, "To my dear misanthrope. Teresa." Teresa vacates the room and the camera stays behind to look at the piano, alone in the empty room, a witness to the hollowing effects of the past on the film's present.

Though the connection is never explicitly made, the man's dark hair (different from Teresa, Fernando, and Isabel's blond hair), the inscription on the back of the photo, the letter from the beginning of the film, and the letter that Teresa burns in its envelope the night that Ana goes missing all seem to point towards the possibility that Ana's father is the man in the photos. What's more, Teresa's description of the house in her opening letter and the photos of her dark haired lover imply the likelihood that the fugitive dark-haired soldier who Ana meets in the house is the same man to whom Teresa writes in the beginning of the film. In this way, the drama of Ana's phantasies about the Monster are deeply linked to Teresa's past, one that was interrupted by the war.

Both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan theorize about the affects of prolonged pre-maturational helplessness on the infant's relationship to the first significant other in the child's life. For most infants, this other is the Mother. Recognizing the contingency of its existence upon the Mother, the infant becomes closely keyed into the perceived desires of the Mother, attempting to perform the role that the Mother will find pleasing in order to secure the child's own wellbeing. One of the troubles with this relationship, however, is the enormous potential for misinterpretation of desires on the part of the child not only because of the elements that are subject to change in translation, but also because the Mother does not consciously control all of the desires that she might communicate. Thus some of the desires conveyed might actually be repressed wishes that, if consciously realized, would be abhorrent to the Mother. This problematic formulation of the relationship between Mother and child is even more complicated in a situation such as Ana's where the adults in the family rarely interact with each other or their children. Teresa's desire for her missing other and for the time before war that is

associated with him are transmuted into Ana's fascination with the ambiguous figure of the Monster.

At the screening of *Frankenstein*, Ana is entranced by the scene when Maria and the Monster play at throwing flowers into the river. She sits at the edge of her seat, at once fearful and enraptured by the drama of the Monster unfolding before her. It is not clear what about the interaction between Maria and the Monster causes Ana to watch so intently. Later, when she witnesses Maria's father staggering through the village, his daughter's corpse in his arms, Ana demands of her sister (eyes never leaving the screen) "Isabel... Why did he [the Monster] kill her? Why did he kill her?" Isabel brushes her sister's questions aside with a promise to tell her later. With that, the camera cuts to a scene of the two girls running through the gate to their home, their playful shrieks of "fear" echoing in the open space.

Ana's questions aren't addressed until she pesters her sister by the light of a forbidden candle. The image is a familiar depiction of childhood, the two young girls secretively lighting the candle and whispering to each other when they should have been asleep in bed. However, it is clear that Ana has not stopped thinking about her questions formed in the dark of the theater, which have now evolved from "Why did he kill her?" to "Why did he kill the girl and why did they [the villagers] kill him after that?" Rather than directly answering her sister's questions, Isabel redirects her attention.

Isabel: They didn't kill him, and he didn't kill the girl.

Ana: How do you know? How do you know they didn't die?

Isabel: Everything in movies is fake. It's all a trick. Besides, I've seen him alive.

Ana: Where?

Isabel: In a place I know near the village. People can't see him. He only comes out at night.

Ana: Is he a ghost?

Isabel: No, he's a spirit.

Ana: Like the spirit that Doña Lucia talked about?

Isabel: Yes but spirits don't have bodies. That's why you can't kill them.

Ana: But he had one in the movie. He had arms and feet. He had everything.

Isabel: It's a disguise they put on when they go outside.

Ana: If he only comes out at night how can you talk to him?

Isabel: I told you he was a spirit. If you are his friend you can talk to him when you want. Just close your eyes and call him "Soy Ana. Soy Ana."⁴

Isabel explains to Ana that the villagers in *Frankenstein* did not kill the Monster, and that the Monster did not kill the girl because she has seen them as spirits, and spirits do not have bodies and so can't be killed. This statement is not a negation of the villagers' attempts to kill the Monster, or of the ordinary consequences of the Monster throwing a girl into the river. In fact, it is an implicit acknowledgment that, despite the Monster being a spirit, the villagers did try to kill him. However, only in the "fake" world of movies can such acts of violence be successful. By telling Ana the story of Frankenstein's Monster as living spirit and by beginning her endeavors with the end in mind ("Qué te pasa?" being a question of what has already passed, and an indication that what has passed must be acknowledged) Isabel seems to attempt to create a closed circuit of Benjaminian fate wherein actions and outcomes are tied together like promises. As Walter Benjamin discusses in his "Critique of Violence," mythic violence is a violence born not as punishment, but rather "...as a mere manifestation of the gods" (248). It is a violence anticipated in the act of being, an inevitability that cannot be ascribed to an act of will. For Isabel, this act of being that instantiates fate bubbles beneath the surface of daily human life. In her play, Isabel enacts the violence that she sees buried in the concern demonstrated by "outsiders" to trauma (a position she is destined to take in relation to Ana by the end of the film) for those who have experienced the traumatic.

⁴ Can be interpreted as "I am Ana," or "It's [me] Ana."

However, unlike Isabel, Ana is caught in a struggle to understand what ties the nature of things as good/bad, real/unreal to their fates.

Not only does Ana want to know if spirits are good or bad, she wants to know which wild mushrooms are good (edible) and bad (poisonous), and has difficulty differentiating between fake death (such as death in cinema and in Isabel's prank) and real death. Her need to know why the Monster killed the little girl and why the villagers killed the Monster is, at heart, a need to understand what life is good/permitted and what life is bad/banned. Imagining herself in the place of the girl who plays with the Monster (a fantasy that is realized near the end of the film when Ana hallucinates that the Monster approaching her as she crouches by the river), Ana needs to understand where she stands in relation to the violence that thrums beneath the quiet exterior of the world she lives in. When her father confronts her after she finds the soldier's blood in the Monster's house, Ana runs away. She runs not only because she knows she has been caught performing a forbidden act, but also because she is unsure whether she is like the soldier, who was killed, or her father, who did the killing. The blood that Ana finds in place of the soldier contradicts Isabel's assurance that spirits can't be killed because they don't have bodies. Regardless of what happened to the soldier, Ana knows that she is not a spirit, she is a little girl, a little girl who can be killed, just like the girl in *Frankenstein*. The answers to Ana's questions at the beginning of the film are now of vital import to the child who needs to understand why her counterpart in the film was killed in order to avoid sharing her fate.

While lost in the woods Ana stumbles upon a mushroom. It is unclear whether she eats it or not, but the possibility exists that Ana fell victim to her inability to tell "good"

from "bad" and ate a poisonous mushroom. This would explain her vision of the Monster as she crouches, shivering, by the stream. Her confusion about the violence that she has uncovered is reflected in the way that she sees the Monster, whose face beneath his stitches is the face of her father, Fernando. Ana's questions go unanswered, and the Familiar has now been merged with Ana's war weary father, a man who spends the film trying to articulate the disaster of the country he sees before him and who is connected to the death of the Monster's human iteration (the soldier).

Establishing Distance

Just as Ana and Teresa are preoccupied with an absence (Teresa's lover, Ana's Familiar, the Monster), the spectator learns to see the empty spaces of the film as equally significant as the occupied ones. The film is characterized by numerous establishing shots and long shots where the unmoving camera documents time passing in empty or sparsely populated spaces. The distance on the part of the camera gives the village a ghostly aura. Shots of empty streets, external views of the buildings, and dry, expansive fields are dispersed liberally throughout the film, and the spaces and sets of the film become as familiar to the viewer as some of the characters do. The viewer knows the different ways that Ana's father Fernando, his wife Teresa, and Ana herself occupy Fernando's study, and the viewer knows what the rooms of the house look like when empty of occupants. These long shots of empty or nearly empty spaces grant the viewer insight into some of the "desolation and sadness" that Teresa describes in her letter. When writing to her lover Teresa remarks, "I often wonder what became of everything we had there. I don't say that out of nostalgia. It's hard to feel nostalgic after what we've been through these past few

years." This statement, particularly interesting in the context of Susan Stewart's argument that "nostalgia is the desire to re-create something that never existed before...to reclaim a lost object we never possessed" (Jenkins 4) demands recognition of what was lost, not in an attempt to reclaim, but rather in an attempt to understand the current world in which she lives without forgetting the life from which it evolved. The characteristic long, still shots of rooms and landscapes have an almost photographic affect, in the spirit of Andre Bazin, who asserts, "...photography does not create eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption" (Bazin 169). As Teresa says, they are not nostalgic. Rather, they are testaments to suffering in a period not long passed at the time of the film's release. However, these shots would not be nearly so powerful if many of them did not feature children. In one example the camera sits perched outside of the school building, looking down from a very high angle, nearly lining up with the corner of the building. This shot, which shows the passage of time, captures the lonely building as small groups of children trickle into it. Sometimes the shot contains only the building, followed by a child or group of children who cross to the door of the building, disrupting the shot's ghostly affect. The process continues until Isabel and Ana, clearly late, eventually rush into the building. Without children, the shot could be a postcard from a ghost town. The children moving through the space drag the image from a dead time into a more pressing present. These shots remind the viewer that the film, though clearly situated in the past from the outset, is not a film about a distant time that cannot affect the present. Such scenes remind the viewers of their own relationship to the past. Even

generations after the war, children of survivors wander the fraught landscape of trauma and memory handed down to them in ways both subtle and apparent.⁵

Some of the most important and protracted shots of the movie feature Ana (and, at one point, the soldier) making the long trek across the plains to the house when Isabel said the Monster lives. Beginning with Ana's first trip when she is accompanied by her sister, through to the end, the camera keeps a long distance from the figure(s) crossing the plains, occasionally breaking continuity with jump cuts to indicate the great distance the figures must travel to reach the house. Even when the camera reunites with Ana as she reaches the house, a careful, though less extensive distance is maintained between the girl and the camera on the outside of the house. It is as if, as Ana moves towards the Monster, she separates herself from the world of the film and the viewer, entering instead a protected realm in the imagined space of the Familiar.

The above-listed means of imposing distance in *The Spirit of the Beehive* are all critical in the configuration of the film as a war film, and not merely a family drama or coming of age story. *The Spirit of the Beehive* is a war movie where the war is hidden in tensions just below the surface of the film. The war exists in the form of a nearly empty village, in the red yoke and arrows of the Franco regime painted onto the side of a building at the entrance to Hoyuelos (Camino 92), in Teresa's letter to her lover on the battlefield, in Fernando's struggles to articulate through allegory the mute chaos he perceives around him, and in Ana's fixation on the nature of a spirit that she is introduced to in *Frankenstein* and that she cannot help but perceive in the world around her. There is rarely a moment in the film when the viewer isn't left to wonder what has not been said,

⁵ For more on inherited trauma see Selma Fraiberg et al's "Ghosts in the Nursery" as examined in the Introduction of this Thesis.

or to marvel at the distance between the small family of four in their large, sparsely furnished house in their large, sparsely populated village. In this way, what is not narrated and explained is what has the strongest presence in the film. Isabel and especially Ana, as the observers who seem to witness and experience things that are not always apparent to the viewer, bear the weight of the hidden war. Ana refuses to peacefully relinquish her bond to her Monster, the Spirit that haunts her and her family.

"Soy Ana": Ana, the Spectator, and the Final Scene

After Fernando and the search party find Ana, she undergoes a profound change. Confined to bed, Ana doesn't eat, drink, or speak, and she avoids sunlight. Teresa, worried for her youngest daughter, calls in the village doctor. Listing Ana's symptoms, Teresa finishes, "She looks at us like she doesn't recognize us. It's like we don't exist." The doctor, Miguel, brushes her concerns aside, "Teresa, Ana is still a very small child. She's under the effect of a powerful experience, but she'll get over it.... Bit by bit she'll begin to forget. Teresa, the important thing is that your daughter is alive. She's alive." The adults have no way of knowing what Ana's "powerful experience" entailed, and regardless of the ways it changed Ana, the doctor is convinced that the resiliency of childhood will soon banish the negative impact of the experience. The scene powerfully conjures the treatment of civilian survivors of wartime (detailed further in Chapter II's analysis of *Grave of the Fireflies*). In the next scene Isabel sneaks into the room where Ana is sleeping. Though she used to share a room with Isabel, Ana's bed now sits beside Isabel's empty bedframe, the older girl having been moved away from her mysteriously ailing sister. Even when Isabel lets light in through the window and sits on the bed, Ana

remains unresponsive. Positioned at Ana's back, the camera captures Isabel gazing into her sister's face.

In the final scene, Ana rises from her bed. Drawn to the moonlight coming from the windows and the sound of the dog barking outside, Ana opens the glass doors and proceeds to the balcony. Moonlight falls strongly upon her, as it did on the night she hallucinated the Monster in the woods. Isabel's voice comes in voiceover, reiterating her words when she first told Ana about the Monster being a spirit, "If he is your friend you can talk to him whenever you want. You close your eyes and call him. 'Soy Ana. Soy Ana.'" Ana looks up and then out to the right of the camera. She closes her eyes briefly and opens them at the sound of the train in the distance. She stares into the distance for a moment before the camera cuts behind her to frame the window and the moonlight streaming around her. Ana turns and pauses as the shot fades to dark. The scene is ethereal with Ana, dark eyed and pale skinned, waiflike in the moonlight, and her sister's voice playing above her as if a voice in her mind. This is the only scene where the viewer might believe they are hearing Ana's thoughts, but at the same time the viewer seems inconsequential to Ana's profound and mysterious gaze. She seems to see out beyond the film itself, past the train that carries letters between her isolated town and the rest of the world, past the fields and streets that were so carefully documented, past the timeframe of the film and into some mysterious other place.

The scene, while breathtaking, is also deeply troubling. The spectator is left without knowledge of Ana's future. Will she forget her experiences and mature into a woman like her mother, as the doctor suggests, or will she, like her Father, linger trapped in the only partially internalized realm of the Familiar? The moonlight, which features

prominently in Ana's nocturnal venture to the Monster's house and in her night in the woods, seems to hold Ana firmly in its thrall, marking her as bound to the Spirit that she might summon. The viewer doesn't know if Ana closed her eyes to call to the Spirit or if she merely closed her eyes in recollection, but the consequences of her choice are enormous. Ana must either unmask her Spirit and face the repressed truths about her family and her own circumstances, or she must turn her face from what she glimpsed when she saw her father's face beneath the Monster's and surrender herself to the ghostly realm of silence and unanswered questions wherein the Monster resides. The way the film ends, without Ana's voice either summoning the Spirit or asserting her own personhood, relegates Ana to the borderland between film and viewer, just like the history and horrors that, evading censorship, lie just below the surface of *The Spirit of the Beehive*.

Chapter II

"Why do they die so soon?": Dead Children and Un-mourned Loss in *Grave of the Fireflies*

Introduction

Released in 1988, 43 years after the detonation of the atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Grave of the Fireflies* is an animated film that follows siblings Setsuko (age 4) and Seita (age 14) as they struggle to survive the end of World War II after their mother is killed in one of the many firebomb raids of Kobe. Released as many Japanese citizens who were children during the Second World War were in the process of raising children of their own, *Grave of the Fireflies* is a powerful exegesis on the atrocities committed by both the Americans and the Japanese against the citizens of Japan. Rather than engaging in commentaries that undercut the culpability of the Japanese in their own suffering, painting the Japanese as victims, *Grave of the Fireflies* offers a stark and commanding portrait of two children struggling to survive in a time when the suffering of children was regarded as an accepted fact of life no different from the suffering of their adult counterparts (something David Stahl refers to as "survival egoism" in his essay, "Victimization and 'Response-ability'"). However, the film meditates on these topics not as a means of justifying victim mentality or shame or guilt, but rather as a way of demanding acknowledgement of the past as a complex and multifaceted specter that continues to haunt the present in the form of trauma and repression. As Nicholas Stargardt argues in the context of children suffering in Germany and in German concentration camps:

So much emphasis on innocent suffering can... make children appear strangely passive within the accounts of harm done to them, the objects rather than the

subjects of history. But most children were still able to engage with their environment and lived the war in a network of social relationships: if we want to find children's own wishes and responses to events it is here that we should look (11).

This chapter focuses on Seita and Setsuko not only as sufferers or victims, but also as individual agents who are capable of making penetrating observations about the costs of Japanese civilian and military participation in World War II.

Director Takahata Isao⁶ refuses to rely on mechanisms of shock or suspense in the telling of *Grave*. Within moments of the film's opening the main character, Seita, announces, "September 21, 1945. That was the night I died." These opening lines declare Seita's status as a ghost and mark his struggles for survival (displayed through the rest of the film) as futile. The viewer enters the film by witnessing Seita's emaciated corpse slump to the ground from its seated position against a pillar in a train station. Seita dies surrounded by the uncaring adults using the train station and by the muttered disgust of passers-by who remark how shameful it is to have beggars littering the station when the Americans are due to arrive. The frame of the shot removes faces and torsos from view, and the viewer is treated to only one human gesture, an anonymous hand that deposits rice balls by Seita's outstretched legs. The offering may as well be an offering to the dead (offerings that Setsuko will form out of mud later in the film) because Seita is too weak to even move his hands towards the food, perhaps too far gone to even notice the food is there. The gesture, while kind, is too little, too late. When at last he dies, Seita's death is met with a weary sigh of "Another one?" by a custodian of the station. These opening

⁶ This paper lists Japanese authors' names with the last name preceding the first name in order to honor the Japanese language and culture's conventions.

moments in *Grave* establish the world of the film as a realm at once familiar and bizarre; a realm where dying and dead children are mundane disturbances, where the Narrator is a ghost, and where tragedy is an inevitability whose impact is undiminished by anticipation.

Seita's status as a ghost lends him an air of legitimacy. As a symbol of unfinished affairs, the ghost has no reason to lie or deceive (Davis). Seita's depictions of the events leading to his and Setsuko's deaths do not exculpate him of guilt or culpability in his little sister's death. The viewer has no reason to doubt him. However, the fact that Seita and Setsuko are ghosts raises a series of questions for the viewer: why are Seita and Setsuko haunting the countryside rather than being reunited with their dead parents? Why are they the only ghosts to appear in the film? The two siblings appear to be in a world of their own, separated from the living besides whom they occasionally travel by sharply contrasting color palettes: the red hues of fireflies for the dead and cool colors for the living. The viewer is at first led to believe that Seita and Setsuko remain as ghosts in order to tell their stories as witnesses to the end of the war, but the end of the film banishes such a simple explanation, as neither he nor Setsuko disappear or appear to depart the living world. Rather, both siblings sit on a hill staring into the city and the present moment of the viewer, a moment that they never lived to grow into. *Grave of the Fireflies* is not a film that is meant to banish the past. Rather, the film stands as a reminder to those who have attempted to bury the horrors of the war that denial and repression do not erase the past. Takahata, like Selma Fraiberg, seems to posit the exorcism of the past as a fallacy, suggesting instead that one must learn to live alongside

the ghosts of the past, clearing spaces for them without accepting guilt and shame as a sufficient engagement with history.

Seita, as the Narrator, occupies a conflicted, liminal position in the film. Neither an adult nor fully a child, at the age of 14 Seita is torn between two worlds. On the one hand, he wants to protect and provide for his little sister, on the other, he wants to play and to be protected from the air raids and harsh conditions permeating his daily life. Not only is Seita torn between childhood and adulthood, as a ghost he is trapped between the past and the present, unable to age and interact with the living world, but no longer fully occupying the time leading up to his death. Seita shares his memories with the viewer primarily through visual means, transposing memories onto the living scenery as if to remind the viewer that the past very much occupies the present. As a verbal Narrator, Seita's spoken stories are largely confined to talking about death: first his, and then Setsuko's. Even in his memories, his most pivotal spoken narratives involve hiding his mother's death from Setsuko and falsifying narratives of safety (fortified bomb shelters and avenging naval forces) in order to reassure her. Thus, the viewer learns to trust what she witnesses in Seita's memory-narratives rather than to rely solely on his words.

Unlike the other Narrator-Mute pairs under discussion in this thesis, where the Mute is truly marked by silence and the Narrator occupies a position of authority through direct address, Seita and Setsuko's roles are less clearly defined. Setsuko speaks often, asking questions and making demands and, as discussed above, Seita's narration is only partly verbal. Setsuko is a Mute not because of her silence, but rather because of the knowledge that she keeps to herself, sharing it only in rare and startling moments, using her clear-sighted questions as a means of interrupting soothing narratives and

transforming the easy, comforting appearance of the Familiar (fireflies) into a dual symbol of violence and comfort. Setsuko demonstrates powerfully what Susan Honeyman argues in *Elusive Childhood*: "The most effective way to disrupt adult discourse and yet be sheltered by the imposed guise of innocence is in the form of a question" (133). However, as the film progresses and adult figures of authority disappear from Setsuko's life, the supposed shelter provided by the "imposed guise of innocence" falls away and Setsuko, still very much a child, is rendered a sufferer of very real conditions of hunger, grief, and fear. Through observations and penetrating questions Setsuko reveals herself to be deeply aware of death and of the losses that the adult figures in her life presume she is too naive to understand.

Seita and Setsuko, as ghosts and children with specific stories, stand in for the countless individuals who were left out of popular representations of the war. Their struggles to find comfort and the profound love that they feel for each other reject victimizing narratives that render violence and suffering as at once banal and exceptional to daily life. Just as Seita and Setsuko's ghost-bodies stand in sharp contrast to their emaciated corpses, the moments of humor, wonder, and adoration shared between the siblings always stand in tension with the bleakness of their lives and deaths. Seita and Setsuko, as individuals, represent a generation's experience of war. *Grave of the Fireflies* is based on a short story of the same name by Nosaka Akiyuki and is a poignant blending of insights from Nosaka and Takahata, both of whom are survivors of air raids (Stahl). After an air raid on his hometown, Seita finds his mother covered head to toe in bandages suffering from severe burns. Seita conceals the direness of his mother's condition and her ultimate demise from Setsuko and from his Aunt, a selfish and proud woman who

begrudgingly shelters the two children after the destruction of their home. However, the Aunt's patience wears thin as the special rations allotted to Seita and Setsuko as children of soldiers run out and Seita refuses to participate actively in war efforts. Choosing to leave their Aunt's home, Seita and Setsuko move into a pond-side bomb shelter. There the siblings struggle to survive until Setsuko succumbs to malnutrition and dies.

The siblings' story, while specific, is not theirs alone. In "Victimization and 'Response-Ability'" David Stahl analyzes Nosaka's relationship to his past as demonstrated by his body of fictional and autobiographical works. In doing so he argues:

...following multiple 'returns of the repressed' during 1966-67, Nosaka Akiyuki, a survivor-narrator who was traumatized as a teenager in the American firebombing of Kobe and suffered the loss of his foster father, the crippling of his foster mother, and the death from starvation of the one-and-a-half-year-old adopted sister left in his care, endeavored in (fictionalized) 'factual accounts' (*jitsuroku*) and autobiographical fiction (*jiden shōsetsu*) to work over and through his traumatic past by recalling, re-enacting, bearing witness to and critiquing his shattering experience of total war (163-164).

Stahl traces the iterations of Nosaka's story from his admission to having eaten his sister's food (Stahl 171) to the re-writing of his experience in "Grave of the Fireflies," where his step-sister lives again through four-year-old Setsuko, accompanied by her devoted and loving brother Seita. Where Nosaka ate his sister's food and struck her to silence when she cried, Seita dutifully gives his sister his share of food and walks with her amongst the fireflies when she cries at night. When Setsuko succumbs to starvation, Seita is not far behind. However, "Grave of the Fireflies" is a story that is littered with graphic

descriptions of death, starvation, and the destruction left in the wake of the American fire raids. Takahata Isao removed much of the graphic imagery from *Grave of the Fireflies*, translating the story from Nosaka's own experiences and adding his own experiential framework to the animation of the film.

Stahl outlines a number of critical responses to the film, both within and without Japan:

Many people--Japanese and non-Japanese... are brought to tears. And while some empathize with fourteen-year-old Seita, others blame him for the death of Setsuko.... Still others experience an ambivalent combination of grief and censure. Reactions outside Japan include anger... claims that the film perpetuates the postwar Japanese master narrative of national victimhood and rhetorical questions about whether anime deserves to be taken seriously. Responses in Japan would include--and perhaps intermix--a sense of personalized and/or collective suffering, victimization and loss, anger at the wartime Japanese government, the United States government or both, discomfort concerning the adult acts of survival egoism depicted, a commitment to non-belligerence and a conviction that Japan must never again find itself in such an abject, defenseless position (161-162).

Wendy Goldberg's essay "Transcending Victimization" focuses on refuting charges that *Grave* is a film that promotes victimization of the people of Japan, focusing on Seita's culpability for his sister's death and his failure to fulfill his duties as a member of the fire brigade (whose uniform he wears) in fighting the fires caused by the fire bombings. Goldberg argues that Seita, in a prideful attempt to play an adult man, forces his sister to

take on a role as mother and even lover and leads her to her demise (Goldberg 47). While there is merit to Goldberg's argument, her attempt at refuting victimization narratives causes her to fall into an equally restrictive interpretation of the film. I argue that such attempts to understand Seita in *Grave* as either victim or culprit derive from a tradition of restricting the role of children in films in order to avoid unresolved conflicts.

In *The Child in Film*, Karen Lury points out that children make excellent victims of war. Children are perceived as innocent, not responsible for the violent crimes of adults, and incapable of contextualizing their own suffering. Children are loaded subjects, representing hope for the future and a romantic nostalgia that envisions adults as fallen innocents who have been cut off from a world of awe and purity⁷. To attempt to polarize characters such as Seita into either innocents or criminals is to fail to recognize the complexity of the historical moment that they occupy and to turn one's face from the reality that children as subjects are capable of exerting agency, of suffering, and of poignantly internalizing the state of the world around them. Neither Seita nor Setsuko disappear with death, silenced by suffering and situations out of their control. Rather, both children return as ghosts, occupying both the past and the present, enjoining viewers to penetrate the veneer of banality that normalizes the violence and trauma that haunt survivors of the war.

Ghost Narratives and the Pursuit of Innocence

When Setsuko's ghost is first released from the tin containing her ashes, she fails to see Seita's ghost standing beside her, fixating concernedly on her brother's emaciated

⁷ Kathy Merlock Jackson identifies a shift in attitudes towards children in film as part of a growing ambivalence towards the future in the atomic generation in *The Image of the Child in American Film*, a trend further elaborated upon in Chapter III of this Thesis.

body as the brother she recognizes. It is not until Seita reaches out a hand to guide her that Setsuko noticed her brother's restored form beside her. Setsuko's initial failure to notice her brother's spirit instead of his corpse is emblematic of a similar struggle on the part of the viewer. Images of starved bodies and dying children, while deeply troubling, are common in depictions of World War II. What is not common is for the viewer to be confronted with a ghostly reminder of just what such bodies once looked like. The viewer is not afforded the luxury of imagining an abstract and healthy child to depart from Seita's emaciated remains. Instead, the viewer is confronted with Seita himself, still troubled in death, lingering by his body and announcing the day of his death as if to replace the tombstone he will not receive. Just as Seita and Setsuko are emblematic of a repressed past for viewers of the film, Seita and Setsuko's healthy-looking ghosts signify loss much more clearly than the sole image of their emaciated and malnourished corpses alone could.

Unlike Seita, Setsuko's ghost seems not to have appeared immediately after death. Rather, her spirit is released from her spilled ashes shortly after her brother's death. She appears, wreathed by fireflies, as if summoned by her brother's devotion, sorrow, and guilt to accompany him in another lonely journey. This configuration is representative of their relationship as a whole. Seita relies on Setsuko to help him remain strong. He needs Setsuko to need him as an emotional support. Seita keeps their mother's death from Setsuko and in doing so is able to postpone his own mourning; when the world is covered in flames from air raids, Seita narrates the strength of bomb shelters to his frightened sister, staving off his own fear. It is the need to create a safe story for Setsuko that gives Seita a sense of purpose.

Though Seita attempts to preserve his sister's innocence by keeping her ignorant (to what extent he can) of the death and destruction around her, Setsuko herself takes loss and destruction as a fact of life. While Seita carries her on his back in their trek to find their mother after the raid, the two siblings take in the destruction around them. Ash and debris float in the air, and Seita pauses before the ruins of the town, stating, "It's all gone. That was the civic hall. We ate lunch there once." Setsuko peers over her brother's shoulder and calmly asks, "Seita, is our house gone too?" When Seita responds, "Probably" Setsuko concernedly asks, "What will we do?" but she does not cry or break down. The loss of her home is taken as a manageable fact of life. While Setsuko's needs thrust Seita into the role of adult protector, Setsuko's quiet revelations of perceptiveness and the largeness of her open expressions of sorrow expose the fractures in Seita's performance of adulthood, as is exemplified in a poignant scene that takes place just after Seita has seen his badly burned mother in the makeshift infirmary of the elementary school.

Unable to wake his mother, Seita returns to the playground where Setsuko, accompanied by a neighbor, digs in the sandbox. With the camera shooting from behind his back, Seita pauses for a moment. The camera pulls even farther away, consigning Seita's beige-clad form to the dusty, bleak landscape. Setsuko and the neighbor are small, dark landmarks in the distance to Seita's right. The viewer knows that just behind the camera lies the densely populated elementary school filled with children, families, and the wounded, but the long shot gives the illusion of isolation, allowing Seita to

experience privately the devastation that is anything but unique to him⁸. The camera cuts briefly to his face, eyes wide and mouth small as he takes the moment to become as illegible as the landscape, for when the camera settles next on his face he wears a calm and solemn mask. This is the mask that Seita wears when he entrusts his mother's green-stoned ring to Setsuko's safekeeping and lies to her that their mother is in a hospital in a neighboring town. Setsuko first asks if their mother will need her ring, then quickly requests to see her. Recognizing verbally what he has not yet internalized, Seita tells Setsuko, "It's too late," though he promises to take her to visit the next day. The camera zooms in on Setsuko as she fidgets and rocks with her hands behind her back. Seita perches on the edge of the sandbox, his back turned to his sister as she struggles with her upset emotions and disappointment. He remains with his back turned as Setsuko succumbs to tears and shrinks to the ground, weeping into her knees.

Unlike Seita who in the earlier shot pushed his distress into the ashes in the air, making himself small in the face of his sister's perceived need for ignorance, Setsuko's grief fills the screen. The camera zooms in to barely encompass her frame, tilting in a low angle shot to catch the little girl's crumpled face as she struggles with a grief that she cannot fully articulate. Setsuko must crouch around her sorrow as if to protect it from further outside stimuli, hugging it to her chest as she cries. Even Seita is unable to penetrate her tears with his demands that Setsuko watch him perform flips around the gymnastic bars in the playground. The camera pulls back, shrinking Seita's impotently flipping form and his sister's huddled body against the empty landscape.

⁸ A few scenes earlier Seita and Setsuko pass by refugees scattered on a hilltop. One refugee laughingly remarks, "Well, it's not like I was the only one who lost his house. We're all in the same boat." At the same time, people scour the ditches for the bodies of loved ones.

A similar scene occurs when Seita's Aunt proposes that Seita sell his mother's kimonos for rice. Setsuko appears to be asleep next to Seita as he agrees to sell the kimonos, but as the Aunt tries to take the kimonos from the room Setsuko springs up and clings to the cloth, crying frantically. Just outside the door, Seita's ghost turns away and covers his ears trying to block out his sister's cries. In the moment, Seita still clung to the hope that his sister was ignorant of their mother's death. However, Seita's ghost knows that Setsuko is well aware that their mother has died and recognizes that her cries are over more than the loss of loved objects. In this way, the knowledge that Setsuko will not admit having to Seita is conveyed through scenes of profound and inconsolable mourning.

Despite Seita's best efforts, being a child does not earn either himself or Setsuko the protection from the injustices of the world that traditional Western rhetoric is so eager to confer upon children. In *Elusive Childhood*, Susan Honeyman argues that defining childhood by the so-called protected status earmarked for it denies that there are so few kids who truly are afforded such innocence or protection (14). Rather, the adults around Seita and Setsuko take for granted that everyone is experiencing loss, and that the scale of shared tragedy erases the needs of the individuals who experience it. Adults display a complete lack of empathy or even emotion when interacting with Seita over the deaths of his mother and his sister. As the doctor adds Seita's mother's fly- and maggot-covered body to the pile of the deceased in the cremation grounds he casually remarks that the ceremony needed to happen quickly due to the heat, and that he hadn't bothered to remove the bandages because "believe me, you don't want to see that." Similarly, when Seita purchases charcoal for Setsuko's cremation, the vendor cheerfully gives instructions

on how to burn the body and which wood will burn best (beanstalks, he assures Seita, light the best) and then remarks, "In spite of it all, lovely day." The image of Setsuko and Seita's gaunt bodies or of their mother's corrupted corpse is a familiar image to those that claim knowledge of war, especially of World War II. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum states that "[t]he Germans and their collaborators killed as many as 1.5 million children," and images of these skinny, abject corpses and children on the verge of death abound in memorials and wartime literature. However, the attachment of these grotesque images of death and violence to the specific stories of Seita and Setsuko prevents the viewer from detaching violence into a terrible but banal side effect of war.

Seita is torn between responsibility and safety: he is old enough to help fight fires or participate in similar wartime efforts and to be confronted with the realities of death and bodily corruption, but he is too young to fight and not mature enough to be deemed an adult. He finds himself caught between attempts to protect and provide for Setsuko and moments where he sings folksongs with Setsuko or, when confronted with the destruction of his hometown, fervently states, "Dad will make them pay."

In "Creative Writers and Daydreaming" Freud states:

A child's play is determined by wishes: in point of fact by a single wish--one that helps in his upbringing--the wish to be big and grown up. He is always playing at being 'grown up', and in his games he imitates what he knows about the lives of his elders (438).

In some ways, Seita plays at being his own father. Before the air raid strikes his home he checks on his mother, asking if she has taken her heart medication and making sure she has everything she needs to reach a shelter safely. Assured of his mother's safety, Seita

buries a cache of food in the yard and prepares Setsuko's fire raid hood. While Setsuko demands that Seita grab her doll, Seita slips the photo of his father out of its frame and into his pocket. Both rescued artifacts are prominently depicted as they age and wear down with the children who treasure them.

Artifacts: Setsuko's Doll, Seita's Cap & Photo, and Fireflies

Setsuko's doll accompanies her throughout the film, and its decay mirrors Setsuko's. However, it is important not to mistake the doll as a metaphor for Setsuko. Rather, the doll stands as a reminder of what Setsuko is not. Setsuko's doll has forgettable features and a limp body, stuffed to give it form rather than substance. On the surface, both Setsuko and her doll are subject to forces outside of their control and dragged about by others, but such a limited reading ignores Setsuko's agency. While Setsuko is unable to make adult decisions, she is not a passive character. Setsuko refuses to be ignored; she cries at night (though she doesn't explain why), refuses to walk when she is too weary, and mulishly turns down food that she doesn't like. Even more importantly, Setsuko chooses when to share her own knowledge and when to hide it to herself. Unbeknownst to Seita, and thus to the viewer, Setsuko's Aunt tells her "mama's in a grave, too." Despite this revelation, Setsuko remains quiet in the face of Seita's repeated promises to take her to see their mother soon. It is not until Setsuko is burying the fireflies that she reveals her knowledge to Seita, breaking the facade of naiveté that Seita tried so hard to protect. Unlike her doll, Setsuko possesses the ability to break her silence and to reverse perceived power dynamics between siblings with questions. As Honeyman argues, "Unsuspected and overlooked, literary children demonstrate the ability to upset adult authority through honest observation and thinking from outside of established languages

and logic..." (125). Without arguing with Seita or asserting her own story, Setsuko's query about the ephemeral lives of fireflies redefines Seita (as Narrator) and the viewer's understanding of her character, overturning her status as an ignorant sufferer into a sophisticated figure struggling to mourn a loss that has remained largely unacknowledged.

Takahata's inclusion of Setsuko's doll stands to remind viewers that Setsuko herself is not a mere allegory, figure, or set piece. She is a specific person whose story, at least in *Grave*, will not be ignored in favor of generalized representations of trauma and loss. The doll is a reminder of the masses of children that shared similar experiences of the war with Setsuko, but it is also a condemnation of the generalization and normalization of suffering that the survivors of the war used to diminish the impact of the suffering they bore witness to. In retrospect, war is often recorded in terms of statistics--the numbers of casualties, dead, and battles won, the percentages of populations displaced or decimated--the adults depicted in *Grave of the Fireflies* apply this impersonal lens to the people around them as if they were already dead, however, it is not until Setsuko dies that her blue clothes turn red to match her doll's garments. In one instance a man beats Seita for stealing vegetables and drags the emaciated teen to the police station, even as his starving sister cries and follows behind in the night, calling Seita's name. By failing to acknowledge Seita and Setsuko as individuals, people like Seita's Aunt, the farmer who catches Seita stealing produce, and the custodians at the train station become responsible for the creation of unmarked graves and the ghosts (trauma and repressed memories and emotions) that haunt them as a result.

In contrast to Setsuko's doll, Seita's photo of his father serves as a token of childhood phantasy and dependence. Seita's father only appears in photographic memories, barely moving. In one of them he is, in fact, posing for a family photo, and in the other he is participating in a naval review, recognizable as Seita's father more for his position of prominence in the memory than for his features. Seita's father is a static figure, one that is more recognizable as an absence and as a symbol in Seita's daydreams than as a person. For Seita, his father is inseparable from the power of the Japanese navy, and as such figures as an avenging figure in the face of the devastating fire raids. Confronted with the incineration of his home, Seita states with confidence, "Dad will make them pay." It is for this reason that Seita can't begin to imagine that his father's ship has been sunk when he fails to receive a response from his father to news of his mother's death. It is not until he is withdrawing the last of his mother's money from the bank to try to buy Setsuko food that Seita hears of Japan's unconditional surrender. In a panic, Seita demands of a stranger what happened to the "unsinkable Japanese navy." The older man replies that the entire navy has been sunk to the bottom of the sea, sending Seita into a panic. Seita grabs the stranger's shirt and demands to know if his father's vessel has also sunk, not even mentioning the name of the ship. The bitter, seemingly indifferent man treats him as a "crazy kid" in one of the few instances where Seita's status as anything other than an adult is acknowledged. On the road back to the pond shelter Seita pulls out his father's photo and repeats to himself, "Now dad's gone too. Dead. Dad's dead," but he is quick to hide any trace of his knowledge from Setsuko when he returns to the shelter. However, Setsuko is already too far gone by the time Seita returns, and though he had earlier promised never to leave her alone again after this final trip, it soon becomes

evident that his promise has come too late. Like his father, Seita has disappeared in Setsuko's time of need.

Wendy Goldberg places heavy emphasis on Seita's fire brigade uniform and his failure to fulfill his duty by fleeing to bomb shelters rather than helping to put out the fires caused by the air raids. It is true that Seita's uniform and the responsibility associated with it hang as an injunction over his head, demanding that he fulfill his prescribed role. In one of the few scenes where Seita is depicted relaxing while Setsuko does her own activity, he is reading a book with a soldier on the cover, so that even his acts of laziness fall under the shadow of what is expected of him. His Aunt perceives Seita's flight to the bomb shelter as an act of cowardice and childishness and demands why he doesn't live in the shelter if he is so eager to flee there. When at last Seita stops running from the fires and instead runs to them he does so not to fulfill the needs of the country, but to provide care for his sister where the government has failed to do so. At the first sound of the raid sirens, Seita is forced to run against the current of people fleeing from their homes and to rob the abandoned houses. In one scene, whilst searching for food and valuables to sell (valuables he later learns have become worthless), Seita stumbles on leftovers sitting on a table. He falls upon the food like an animal, shoveling it into his mouth as quickly as he can so he can continue his search. In order to look after Setsuko in the manner he perceives right, Seita is forced to behave directly counter to the behavior prescribed by his country, putting his and his sister's needs above the needs of the many. Seita is shown fleeing from the houses, his clothes (stuffed with his loot) bulge from his body in a parody of his normally emaciated form. Overcome with glee, Seita whoops and jumps on his way back to the bomb shelter. Ultimately, however, Seita's acts

of individual interest, like the acts of patriotic duty expected of him, come to nothing. Setsuko dies, Japan loses the war, and what is left in the wake of the conflicts (both psychological and physical) are bodies beyond count, sunk to the bottom of the ocean like Seita's father or starving to death like Setsuko and Seita.

Seita dies without his signature cap, an indistinct body that mars a public space. What he retains is the damaged fruit drops tin that at the beginning of the war brought Setsuko so much joy and by the end of the war contains her ashes. However, as a ghost, Setsuko's tin is refilled and restored, and Seita's cap is returned to him, a symbol of authority in a red-tinted world bathed in the incendiary light of fireflies where he and Setsuko are the only ghosts. In the manner of a Freudian primal question, Setsuko's query of "Why do they [the fireflies] have to die so soon?" is also a demand of the opposite: "Why don't the fireflies die?" Freud is adamant that the unconscious does not recognize contradiction or negation, operating instead as if both "yes" and "no" are in effect at the same time. Such certainly seems to be the rule for the portrayal of the fireflies. On the one hand, they invoke a sense of childlike wonder: the viewer watches Setsuko play with the insects and gaze at them happily as they fill the bomb shelter like stars. However, on the other hand they are constant reminders of violence and mortality. In an attempt to capture a firefly that Seita holds out to her, Setsuko inadvertently squishes the insect, flailing her hand to wipe off its corpse because "It smells bad." Fireflies first appear to surround the siblings' ghosts in the field where they were discarded. The association of fireflies with death is furthered by the way that the light they cast matches the light cast by the firebombs. Such is poignantly illustrated by a scene at the beginning of the film: Seita's and Setsuko's ghosts board a train and sit in their own compartment, separated

from the cool-toned world of the living by the red color-palette that accompanies them on their journey. As the children settle down for the trip, Seita shakes a fruit drop out of the tin for Setsuko, who gladly offers him one (something he never would have taken in life) and the two turn to look calmly out the window behind them where planes drop volleys of firebombs like ethereal fireflies. Though Takahata emphasizes the beauty to be found in small interactions between the siblings, he offers no easy comfort to either the siblings or the viewer.

Living with Ghosts

Though *Grave* may be a condemnation of what Stahl calls "survival egoism," it is not merely a rewriting of history to spotlight victims and spread guilt. After all, Seita's opening lines emphasize that his character died in 1945, 43 years prior to the release of the film. Those who were children at the time that the events of *Grave* took place were, by the time of the film's release, old enough to be raising their own children. Thus, while it is tempting to experience guilt over the manner of Setsuko and Seita's deaths, the intent behind *Grave* is much more radical: a call for active remembrance and acknowledgement of the traumas of the War in order to mitigate the power that the past has over the next generation of children. Just as Fraiberg et al. warn of the impossibility of exorcising one's ghosts and the danger of repressing them, Takahata encourages viewers to make room for the tragedies of the past and to consciously internalize what understanding they can glean from the hauntings of the past.

While the adults in the film may have normalized violence and suffering in order to survive, viewers of Takahata's film have no such luxury and are instead confronted with the reality that very few bodies are buried or cared for in *Grave of the Fireflies*.

Even the fireflies are too numerous to be completely buried, and their bodies are easily scattered from their mound when a boy kicks it while exploring Seita and Setsuko's bomb shelter. Though Setsuko confesses to knowing that her mother is dead and buried in the ground, believing that their mother has at least been buried, the reality is that the box containing her ashes remains hidden in the bomb shelter. What's more, the remains in the box were collected from a mass cremation, thus it is nearly impossible to say they belonged to the siblings' mother. Setsuko's ashes, mixed with the ashes of her doll, are poured into her empty fruit drop tin and eventually tossed as garbage into a field. The viewer is left to imagine that Seita's body will meet a similar fate, unclaimed and nameless in death amongst dozens of other starved orphans. Thus viewers of *Grave*, by bearing witness, are made stewards of the unburied dead. Meanwhile, the children left behind by casualties of the war are left to try to subsist on the meager offerings made to the deceased, both figuratively (such as is the case with the Aunt's 'hospitality') and literally (as with Setsuko's mud rice balls that she eats out of desperation and the mud *dango*⁹ that a passing boy wishes was "real food," both of which are offerings at the grave of the fireflies).

What, then, is the viewer to make of the living populating such haunted landscapes? Is *Grave of the Fireflies* an exorcism, an argument that Goldberg cites (40) or an incitement to properly accommodate the dead that live with us? In *Haunted Subjects* Colin Davis, following Žižek, argues that the dead return when they are not properly buried, saying "...the ghost returns in order to be sent away again" (2). However, it is clear that Seita and Setsuko will not be sent away. The final scene of the film shows

⁹ A Japanese confection

the two siblings side by side looking out onto the blue world of the living. Seita and Setsuko are dead spectators of the world that has left them behind, surrounded by fireflies, the other faceless and nameless dead of World War II. Discussing Derrida's *hauntologie*, Davis states, "In Derrida's account the spectre becomes a necessary interlocutor, the keystone of a new, as yet unrealised paradigm in which emancipation is linked with the ability to encounter otherness" (76). Following this train of thought, *Grave* is a film that demands a dialogue be opened between the viewer and the ghosts that the viewer houses within himself as a witness or child of a witness of the atrocities of World War II. Seita and Setsuko watch from a red-tinted world that refutes nostalgia and false pretensions of innocence or attempts at ameliorating individuality through numbers. In the haunted writing of "Grave of the Fireflies" and its re-imagination as an animated film, Takahata and Nosaka imbue personal experience with cultural ghosts, giving ghosts the chance to address the viewer and to open a line of dialogue that had been closed for over 40 years.

Chapter III

Imagination TV: *Beasts of No Nation* and the Dangers of Mythologizing Child Soldiers

Introduction

Recent years have seen the eradication of the use of child soldiers rise as a cause to the forefront of humanitarian agencies in the West. *Kony 2012* dragged child soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda into the international spotlight. The film's director, Jason Russell, fitted the project with the tagline: "Make Kony Famous" (Levin 106), arguing that Joseph Kony, founder of the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, was invisibly recruiting child soldiers and that the only way to stop him was to make him visible (Levin 105). Such efforts to publicize the exploitation of child soldiers by no means began with *Kony 2012*. Authors including Anthony Levin and Catarina Martins highlight such films as *Lost Children* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Ezra* (2007), and *Johnny Mad Dog*¹⁰ (2008) as part of a trend towards highlighting the victimization of child soldiers. These films, like *Kony 2012*, focus on children who were forced to commit atrocities in the service of adults. They have played a large role in the popularization of the image of the child soldier as victim; international humanitarian organizations further institutionalize such homogenous portrayals of the child soldier. In 2000, in a bid to define what a child is for the sake of the protection of children from warfare, the International Criminal Court passed the 'Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict,' criminalizing the conscription of children under the age of 18 into national armed forces (Ryan 3).

¹⁰ Like *Beasts of No Nation*, *Johnny Mad Dog* is an adaptation of a book: *Johnny Chien Méchant* by Emmanuel Dongala.

In *Armies of the Young* David Rosen asserts that the case for the elimination of child soldiers rests on three main principles: "...that modern warfare is especially aberrant and cruel; that the worldwide glut of light-weight weapons makes it easier than in the past for children to bear arms; and that vulnerable children become soldiers because they are manipulated by unscrupulous adults" (1). While the first two principles ignore the historical violence of warfare and the reality of the participation of children in warfare¹¹, the last principle, in particular, is troubling because of its implication that children are incapable of acts of agency. This is not to suggest that all children who become soldiers do so willingly, but rather to problematize the belief that all child soldiers are forcibly conscripted and to question why the child soldier has become such a horrendous figure, when historically child soldiers were common and even lauded participants in wars, both fictional and historical.

A poignant and relevant example of such a historical attitude of acceptance can be found in Roland Barthes' "Myth Today." In his essay, Barthes analyzes the cover of a *Paris Match* magazine that features a young black boy in a French uniform saluting with his gaze directed upward and to the right¹² (115). The image, for Barthes, comes with its own problematic set of significations: "...that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors" (115). The overt significations of the magazine

¹¹ David Rosen suggests, for example, that "...between 250,000 and 420,000 boy soldiers, including many in their early teens and even younger, served in the Union and Confederate armies. On the whole, between 10 and 20 percent of recruits were underage" (5).

¹² See Appendix: Figure 1

cover with its image of a young African boy are clearly meant to be positive. The boy's face, smooth and pure in its expression, signifies innocence and devotion. His French uniform here is not a contradiction, but rather a natural complement to his devotion. Seita's uniform in *Grave of the Fireflies* carries similar significance, but also stands as a reminder of his failure to participate properly in the war efforts--a condemnation as much as a symbol of pride. However, there is no such room for contradiction or apprehension in this iteration of the myth of the child soldier as patriot.

Sarah Maya Rosen and David Rosen point to several literary instances of heroic child soldiers, such as Gavroche in *Les Miserables* and Kim in Rudyard Kipling's novel of the same name (306) as icons of patriotism, and highlight the martial aspects of Dumbledore's Army in *Harry Potter* and of *The Hunger Games*, two best-selling young adult series. While Katniss of *The Hunger Games* is certainly a victim of an apocalyptic system of abuse, Harry Potter and his classmates willingly form an army so that they can defend themselves and their school in the absence of adult protection. In the world of modern fantasy, such as in the latter two examples, child soldiers are valorized and looked upon as emblems of choice and responsibility. However, when children from countries in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America choose to fight rather than be victimized, their choices are viewed as a result of coercion, rather than as an act of agency in bitter circumstances.

As noted in Chapter 2, Karen Lury identifies children as:

...'perfect victims', since they are blameless, they make the wrongs of war seem all the more wrong, and the viewer's righteous and explosive response all the more satisfactory. Satisfactory because morally it seems uncomplicated (...children 'did

not start' the war) and because it puts the viewer in a superior position. We are feeling sorry for those who cannot care for themselves and for those we believe should be cared for as some kind of universal right (105-106).

In the context of war, this innocence moves beyond the newness of the child and their unknowing state of being into a temporal position: children cannot be held responsible for adult wars because they were not present to participation in their fomentation. As such, children experience the effects of war without necessarily understanding the reason behind the events that they witness unfolding. Unlike adults, who are held responsible for political awareness, children are expected to remain ignorant of the larger world--their experiences are generally confined to the magical space of the home, wherein their needs are provided for and their encounters with strife are limited and moderated. However, this fantasy of children as somehow uncorrupted by the world around them is a projection of adult desire for a world without emotional conflict or suffering. As discussed in earlier chapters, from a psychoanalytical point of view, children unconsciously become aware of the fears and desires of their parents very early on as a means of ensuring their survival. Children subconsciously harken to the ways in which their parents see the world, learning as much from what they are told as from what they unconsciously glean from their early significant others. The traumas and guarded secrets of adults work their ways into the formation of children's identities. Such is certainly the case for Isabel and Ana in *The Spirit of the Beehive*. The film shows that even children who are generally shielded from war grow up with a sense of that which has been hidden from them. The seemingly silent and innocent Ana is not unaffected by the unspoken tensions manifest in the world around her. However, the suffering of children is not unexpected in the context of war.

Western rhetoric already places children in a position of vulnerability, vehemently arguing for the need to protect and nurture children and to guard their innocence. The need to protect children innately comes with the acknowledgment of the consequences of failure to protect. As such, in *Grave of the Fireflies* Seita and Setsuko's suffering is tragic and horrendous, but it is also part of a known, though uneasily accepted, wartime narrative. What cannot be accepted into the fold is the child that, rather than being a victim, victimizes others. The child soldier is a paradoxical figure because it combines the personage of the vulnerable child with that of the violent and decisive soldier. What emerges is a figure that is outside of the accepted configuration of childhood.

Agu from *Beasts of No Nation* is deeply aware of the danger at his doorstep. His opening lines, "It is starting like this," imply that the story is being told in retrospect, but, after a pause, he continues: "Our country is at war and we are having no more school. So we are having to be finding ways to be keeping busy." "Keeping busy," as it turns out, means selling an empty TV frame by performing "imagination TV" where the screen should be. War is a fact of life, one barely kept at bay because his village is in a "buffer zone." That Agu's mother and younger sibling flee to a nearby city prior to the invasion of the village is taken as a matter of course. It is a separation that troubles Agu but does not surprise him. Anyone watching *Beasts of No Nation* understands that Agu's story and circumstances are not unique. Agu is loveable because he first appears to the viewer as a child who has managed to maintain a sense of imaginative playfulness despite the imminent danger to his existence. His early portrayal solidifies Agu as a child in the viewer's mind, and his increasingly despairing narrative voiceovers remind the viewer of just what Agu has lost and been forced to endure. As such, he is the ideal poster child for

the victimized child soldier, one who is infinitely recognizable because of his tragic disposition. In *Beasts of No Nation* Agu is at once Narrator and Familiar because he represents the figure of the child soldier that has been popularized in the public imagination since the advent of movements against the use of child soldiers in the early 2000s. Agu, and the figure of the child soldier in general, represents that which adults and society have failed to protect.

The failure to protect children is not only regarded as morally reprehensible, it also symbolizes a failure to protect the future. As Lee Edelman points out in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, children figure at the heart of national political rhetoric because they are adults-to-be. In *The Image of the Child in American Film*, Kathy Merlock Jackson notes that after the U.S. dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, America saw an increase in films displaying ambiguous, if not overtly fearful feelings towards children. Gone were the pre-World War II self-reliant fix-it children like Shirley Temple. In their place came dark, tainted, and unknowable children such as are portrayed by Rhoda in *Bad Seed* (1956), Reagan of *The Exorcist* (1973), and Damien of *The Omen* (1976)--children who represented a dark and uncertain future where innocence had been lost or transformed into something unrecognizable. In order to render these monstrous figures recognizable it is necessary to render them as victims or deceptions. Reagan has been possessed by a demon due to feelings of vulnerability resulting from her father's absence and Damien was not a child at all, but rather the antichrist born as a human child. This shift from children as objects of desire to children as monstrous is not as paradoxical as it may first appear. As James Kincaid argues in *Child-Loving*, children, as vessels emptied by innocence, become ideal carriers of adult

fantasies and fears. They are rendered as ultimately other in relation to adults and otherness, as Kincaid asserts, "...is always situated at a distance so great it becomes a dim blur and then disappears. The other is that which we place outside our perceptual field, which we will not allow our metaphorical lens to cover.... We seem to take pleasure in constructing the other not simply as an absence but as a seductive inexplicableness" (32). The other is a lack, something that exists by not being understood or fully recognized, and thus facilitates desire. Thus it is not surprising that these innocent others would be the locus of both fears and desires, anxieties and hopes for the future.

The child as other is situated in the Lacanian realm of *jouissance*. One pursues *jouissance* as an idealized, perfect pleasure knowing that if one were to achieve *jouissance* it would be horrifying and unbearable, rather than pleasurable. *Jouissance* is ideally always just out of reach, a horizon that orients. To approach said horizon would be to come to the end of the flattened Earth; to cross it would be to fall from the face of the planet. As Slavoj Žižek summarizes in *Looking Awry*:

Lacan's point is that the real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as a drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal. The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of this closed circuit (5).

These repetitious rituals act as an excuse to desire to desire. In this case, the innocent child is enough of an enigma that it can continuously be sought and desired without fear of capturing it. It is when the child becomes complex and detailed that it poses a threat (its status as alien and also as not wholly alienated threatens to breach the distance necessary for *jouissance* to remain desirable). The need to flatten the child and neutralize the threat that the monstrous child represents necessitates a veering away from the

complexity of child as other that renders it not merely fuzzy, but fully unknown. In this same way, the child soldier must be rendered as a clear-cut victim, rather than acknowledged as a victim and a perpetrator in one, a figure of choice and of coercion. To fail to do so forces the Western audience to contend with individual feelings of anxiety about the future as well as feelings of guilt for failing to prevent children from being involved in violence. When transformed into victims, child soldiers become a problem with an actionable solution: mobilize international humanitarian organizations to eliminate the use of child soldiers. What is dealt with, then, is the *myth* of the child soldier.

The term "myth" is not used here to suggest an unreality to the existence of child soldiers or to detract from their plight, but rather to call into question the construction and use of the myth itself. Earlier, I mentioned Barthes' reading of the cover of *Paris Match* featuring a young African boy in a French uniform. In "Myth Today" included in *Mythologies* Barthes argues:

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, *it organizes a world which is without contradictions* [emphasis added] because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves (143).

Current rhetoric surrounding child soldiers solidifies the child soldier as a myth insofar as it helps to simplify the figure, eradicating any contradictory or dissonant qualities in favor of dissolving the discomfort associated with it. One cannot hear the phrase "child soldier"

without imagining an African child, stoic-faced and dwarfed by his gun. The child soldier is a monstrous and monolithic emblem of poverty and inequality, one that is easily surveyed in documentaries, films, and photographs and that is thus kept at a psychological distance. As James Kincaid points out in *Child-Loving*, the more that is said about fraught topics (in the case of his argument, pedophilia) the more the speaker's relationship to and feelings about the topic becomes obscured. The myriad campaigns against the involvement of children in war hide a deep-seated anxiety that adults feel regarding children. Kincaid reads the monstrous portrayal of pedophilia as revealing an overwhelming desire for the act. As in Freudian psychoanalysis, the more that the analysand resists and attempts to hide from the analyst (such as creating false stories to tell the analyst) the more is revealed about the subject that is unspoken and avoided. Such is the case with the relationship between the Narrator and the Mute. All vocalizations are paralleled and haunted by what goes unsaid. Just as Kincaid discovers in his examination of discourse on pedophilia, where children are made innocent and without guile and adults who desire them monstrous and malicious, posing child soldiers as either victims or active agents only highlights a fetishization of the child soldier as a locus of desire and hiding the complexity of what the child soldier as ideological construction symbolizes in Western culture.

The Child Soldier and Imagination TV

While much has been said about the flood of films on child soldiers mentioned at the outset of this chapter, very little has been written about one of the newest additions to the filmic library of child soldiers: *Beasts of No Nation* (2015), a Netflix original film

directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga and adapted from the novel of the same name by Uzodinma Iweala. *Beasts of No Nation* is groundbreaking in part because it is the first fictional film released simultaneously on an online film streaming service (Netflix) and in select theaters. Thus, *Beasts of No Nation* ushers cinema, as well as the child soldier, into a new age of mass visibility. Interestingly, the publicists for *Beasts of No Nation* frankly acknowledge the troublesome complexity of the child soldier in their film posters¹³, which show images of the main characters, the child soldier Agu and the Commandant, from various angles with the captions, "Child," "Captive," and "Killer" above Agu and the titles "Savior," "Ruler," and "Criminal," above the Commandant. Even before the film's release, *Beasts of No Nation* began the process of consciously framing its subject matter in relation to viewer expectations for the narrative.

The very first shot of *Beasts of No Nation* structures the entirety of the film's narrative¹⁴, situating what the viewer sees as a shot within a shot, literally capturing the children of Agu's village playing within the frame of a screen-less television. As mentioned above, Agu later refers to this as "imagination TV," and has his friends act out "channels" as he flicks through them. Thus, Fukunaga begins his film by framing it as simultaneously reflective of reality and of fantasy. What Agu narrates is not unfettered, but rather in constant tension with what the viewer and those within the film itself expect of him.

The "imagination TV" figures as a critical symbol in *Beasts of No Nation*. At the outset, it represents Agu's ingenuity and creativity, and also his mischievousness. The frame for Agu's "imagination TV" comes from his father's television set, which he took

¹³ See Appendix: Figure 2

¹⁴ See Appendix: Figure 3

apart without his father's permission. The original "imagination TV" represents Agu's childhood before the war, when he had his mother to sing lullabies, his big brother to prank, his little sister to giggle at, and his father to scold him. His existence was precarious, but also happy. The imagination TV does not return until Agu enters a brothel in the rebel headquarters. After an extended stay in the bush fighting for the Commandant, Agu enters the brothel and sees the TV, an artifact from another life, and thinks to himself, "imagination TV." The reference to the beginning of the film is a startling and cold reminder of everything that Agu has lost and it casts a surreal glint on the scene. While Agu has been in the bush fighting for the Commandant, life continued on, complete with advertisements and shows on TV. The presence of the television set raises questions about what Agu has been fighting for, when the life that he used to live can so clearly never be recaptured and has been relegated to the realm of the imagined.

The framework of the surreal and imaginary is of deep importance to *Beasts of No Nation*. One of the few critics to comment on Fukunaga's film, Bhakti Shringarpure writes, "While the title itself announces that there is, in fact, no nation, it is startling to hear the Ghanian Twi, the reference to Nigeria, and visual nod to ECOMOG, and one is led to believe that Fukunaga might have offered a more complex understanding of the precise setting rather than creating an ambiguous war space" (308-309). Shringarpure's critique mistakes Fukunaga's decision to keep the country nameless for a lack of complexity and cites his refusal to name a specific country despite obvious hints at where the country might be as evidence of laziness, when in fact it is a bid to remind the viewer exactly what they expect to see. By stimulating in the viewer a desire for specificity (a desire that goes unsatisfied) Fukunaga cultivates a subversive demand in viewers for

more than the generalized depictions of violence and inhumanity that are so abundant in film and literature about child soldiers. At the same time, the title of the film and Fukunaga's strict refusal to name the country where it takes place speaks to Agu's own sense of alienation. It is Agu who refers to himself and his fellow soldiers as "beasts of no nation" after the Commandant abandons Dada Goodblood's cause and goes rogue, wandering the countryside and committing violence without aim or purpose. It is when Agu feels he has truly become nothing more than an agent of another's desire (he is no longer fighting the men who slaughtered his family) that he ceases to see himself as human and sensible, relegating himself instead to the robotic life of the coerced child (the beast, incapable of thoughtful self-direction).

The film, in the frame of imagination TV, is as much a reflection of what a Western audience expects from a film about child soldiers as it is an examination of the issue itself. Fukunaga walks the precarious line between stereotypical portrayals of the issue through lengthy scenes of violence, abuse, and manipulation and a shockingly subversive telling of the traditional child soldier narrative. Though the film features extensive scenes of chanted call and response (such as: "How does your Commandant look?" "All right sir!" and "Who are we?" "NDF¹⁵!"), gunfire skirmishes, and scenes of sexual violence, Fukunaga refuses to simply supply the viewer with what she expects to see. Instead, he offsets the viewer's power as knowledgeable outsider by having Agu and the framing of the film itself question the viewer and by refraining from offering pity to characters that do not ask for it. One of the strongest ways in which Fukunaga questions

¹⁵ National Defense Force

traditional portrayals of the conflict and child soldiers in his film is by providing Agu, as Narrator and as Familiar, with a Mute, Strika.

"A Boy Has Two Eyes to See"

Unlike Agu, Strika, as a Mute, paradoxically frustrates and fulfills the viewer's desires. While speaking subjects submit themselves and their stories for scrutiny, thereby making themselves knowable, the Mute always remains at a remove, motivations and thoughts not quite discernable. Like Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, the Mute and the child soldier exist within the bounds of the *polis* (or human society) but are not a part of it, inscribed instead as something bestial and outside of the bounds and protections of human law. Both Mute and *homo sacer* define the boundaries of society, standing in a position that mirrors the lawmaker by acting as an exception that ratifies the law. In the films under analysis in this thesis, the Mute has the features of a child and so visually participates in projections of childhood, but disrupts the order of dominance in which the speaking characters are inscribed. In *Beasts of No Nation*, rather than yielding information as Agu does, thus making himself fathomable/intelligible, Strika holds an unrelenting silence that rebuts attempts to understand and thus gain power over him. Thus, from within existing power structures and conventions of intelligibility for considering child soldiers child soldiers, Strika suggests the presence of other motivations and experiences. Neither innocent nor entirely profane, Strika's presence as an unknown singularity in *Beasts of No Nation* is vital to the film's subversive characterization of the child soldier.

The viewer's first encounter with Strika comes when he leaps from a ledge, covered in foliage like the wrath of the land, and strikes Agu, subduing him and bringing him before the Commandant. It is important to note that Strika is the one who chooses Agu. When Agu is held before the Commandant and his army, Two-I-C (pronounced "two-eye-see" and standing also for second in command), galled that Strika is receiving praise for finding Agu, derides Agu's usefulness, saying that he is "just a boy." The Commandant is quick to correct Two-I-C, saying "A boy? A boy is nothing. A boy is harmless?" a group of children chants in response, "Harmless, no sir!" The Commandant carries on, "Does a boy have two eyes to see? A boy has two hands to strangle and fingers to pull triggers. Why you saying a boy is nothing? Huh? A boy is very, very dangerous. You understand me?" Certainly Strika seems dangerous, toting his machete and responding with a scornful shake of his head when the Commandant asks him if he is hungry and wants to eat Agu. Agu, on the other hand, is shaking, panting, and wide-eyed. When asked why he is in the jungle, it takes him multiple attempts to explain, through gasping breaths and teary eyes, that the government forces killed his father and older brother, and that his father told him to hide in the bush. Rather than offering sympathy or censure, the Commandant introduces himself, squatting at eye level, and demands Agu's name before asking if Agu wants the chance to kill his father's murderers. Agu's nod, and then his more forceful shouts of "yes sir" at once reject and reify the familiar scene of the child who is coerced into fighting. When he first nods his desire to avenge his father, Agu is as silent as Strika, participating in the ambiguity of silence that is so disconcerting to the viewer.

While Strika's silence is impenetrable, the viewer is privy to some of Agu's unspoken thoughts and prayers to God because they feature as voiceover, such as is the case in the opening scene of the film when Agu introduces the state of affairs of his village. Agu's voiceovers play a critical role in bringing the viewer into the world of the film. Agu seems simultaneously to address the viewer and to ignore the viewer's existence, switching between open narrative and direct addresses to God. Agu's moments of introspection, which are not addressed to anyone in particular, are powerful--asides on knowing the smell of dead bodies, on seeing a television for the first time since he left his village, on leaving 2-I-C's body to be eaten by insects--these moments pierce through the alienating violence and force the viewer to see the war as Agu experiences it. These asides have the narrative quality of thoughts on stereo, or of a story told in confidence (perhaps to the counselor that Agu meets at the end of the film), but Agu's addresses to God have another quality entirely. In these addresses, the viewer is an interloper--a voyeur who peers into Agu's hopes and despair. The viewer knows that there is no God listening to Agu's prayers. Only the viewer herself can hear Agu, as is the case after Agu's first kill, when, at the Commandant's repeated exclamation, "These are the men that killed your father" and "kill him!" Agu takes a machete and kills the man weeping before him. His first blow is insufficient, and the Commandant calls Strika to "help [his] brother out" and kill the man with Agu. Afterwards, Agu says in voiceover, "God... I have killed a man. It is the worst sin... but I am knowing too, it is the right thing to be doing."

There is something treacherous and disturbing about hearing Agu's thoughts and prayers, intercepting them before they disappear and yet being unable to speak to Agu in

kind. At one point, towards the end of the film, Agu asks, "Sun, why are you shining on this world? I am wanting to catch you in my hands, to squeeze you until you cannot shine no more. That way, everything is always dark and nobody's ever having to see all the terrible things that are happening here." Having witnessed the Commandant's rule descend into an aimless wandering, cut off from the NDF, and having borne witness to the violence that Agu has committed and has had committed against him, the viewer cannot help but be implicated in Agu's wish. Agu's desire to plunge the world into darkness so that no one can see is one of the only wishes that he makes, and it is the only one that the viewer has the power to grant. Still, the viewer is unable to look away, to turn off the film, or to darken the screen. The spectacle of Agu's suffering and the desire to see him escape or die encourages the viewer to look on, silently. In this way, Fukunaga engages the viewer in yet another struggle for legitimacy. Though the viewer has no way of controlling the film, the film plays actively on what is expected, fueling a sense of unwanted control over the situations depicted.

Contrary to the ways in which Victor Erice denies the viewer the narcissistic fantasy of the camera that exists to fulfill the viewer's desires, Fukunaga forces the viewer to contend with the consequences of receiving more than what she wants. Fukunaga's protracted scenes of violence and anguish push the viewer to experience what she has accepted as a traditional child soldier narrative. It is not enough to know that child soldiers suffer abuse, manipulation, and trauma; one must witness these staples of the genre up-close. When Strika leaps down on Agu with his machete, the viewer, through the camera, whirls in terror and looks up at Strika's leaf-clad form. When Agu kills his first man with a machete, the blood from the blade whips onto the camera lens

and the dull thud of the machetes is all that can be heard over the roaring in Agu's ears. When Agu mistakes the woman one of his fellows wants to rape for his mother, the viewer endures his screams and feelings of betrayal and watches as he silently and emotionlessly shoots her in the head, interrupting her rape. Where Erice reveals the hidden war of *The Spirit of the Beehive* by withholding fulfillment of the viewer's desires to investigate, Fukunaga puts a new light on the fetishizing of the child soldier as a figure and cause by refusing to let the viewer look away, even when his subjects obliquely beg for the viewer to do so. Here again Lacan's theory of *jouissance* offers vital insight into *Beasts of No Nation*, demonstrating the horror that comes when that which has been actively sought throughout the film (power over the child soldier by naming and circumscribing it) by forcing the viewer to see their desires played out beyond the realm of the pleasurable fantasy and into the violence of the real.

Where Agu's narratives offer insight into the psyche of the child soldier, Strika ensures that presumptions about the subjects of the film cannot be easily made or sustained. The viewer never sees Strika outside of his role as a hardened soldier, causing him to have an uncanny effect on the viewer. Unlike Agu, who has a past and a voice in the present, Strika is an enigma. Though he has the bodily appearance of a child, he behaves like a child only in rare circumstances when he is with Agu. Generally his face is solemn, his eyes shadowed by his hat. He does not laugh or cry. He is not vulnerable or contingent upon others for his existence, and he holds his own council. He refuses to be made a victim because he never yields his sorrow or fear for others to see. He is Agu's silent double, supporting him and tying him to the real world when the Commandant rapes him, accompanying him as an ever-vigilant gaze (a reminder of the Commandant's

remark: "A boy has two eyes to see!") in his assignment to protect the Commandant. The two boys together form a whole identity, one that cannot be entirely commercialized as a known entity (victim, child, criminal, etc.).

Agu functions as a Familiar not only to the viewer in his capacity as an emblem of the familiar child soldier; he is a Familiar to Strika, representing a younger version of the boy. When Agu confesses that he is thinking of his family, Strika offers him the twig that he has been chewing on (only to snatch it back moments later when Agu asks if he is dumb and that's why he doesn't talk). Strika is literally responsible for bringing Agu to the Commandant, and his presence at Agu's side is sometimes the only thing that stops Agu from becoming mute himself. Agu does not become whole as a Narrator or as a Familiar until he carries a dying Strika on his back and perhaps unlocks an explanation to Strika's silence. After the Commandant separates from the NDF with his battalion Agu goes into a lengthy voiceover: he is weary, tired of the bullets that eat everything (a reminder of the moment when Agu was first discovered and the Commandant asked Strika if he was hungry and wanted to eat Agu), unsure if there is any way out of war except for death. Agu shows the most energy when, as the battalion departs, he must urge Strika to get up and travel with the group. Despite Agu's incitements, Strika merely shakes his head and crouches in the foliage. It is not until Agu approaches that Strika whimpers and lifts his shirt to reveal a bullet hole in his chest. Unwilling to leave Strika behind, Agu hoists his friend onto his back and treks after the departing battalion. In a profoundly revealing voiceover, Agu reflects, "I am wanting to say to Strika, 'I am tired, too.' I am tired and so the words are not coming out of my mouth." Moments later singing begins to filter through the jungle. Agu calls to Strika, remarking on the singing "Do you

hear that? A song, just like my mother sang." Agu straightens when Strika fails to respond, causing the boy to fall from his shoulders, revealing that he has died as silently as he lived.

While carrying Strika, Agu absorbs a piece of his friend's silence, but he is brought to speak again by the sound of a song that he believes he hears floating through the trees. Unlike Strika, who dies in silence, Agu is unable to fully succumb to exhaustion or to sink into the silence that Strika left behind. Strika's silence is incorporated into Agu's Narrative and partially absorbed by him without ever becoming fully knowable or understood. Aspects of Strika's silence do materialize in encounters between Agu and adults who claim to understand him or have his best interests at heart.

Throughout the film, the Commandant sets Agu apart, even telling that he will always look out for him because he is special--he is like a son (or, sometimes, like himself). Early in the film these statements are met with shy pride and excitement, but as the film progresses, Agu learns to associate such promises with inevitable betrayal. Such is the case in a scene that captures a poignant encounter between Agu and the Commandant. After Agu finds drugs on the body of a slain enemy, Strika gestures for Agu to bring them to the Commandant. Agu does so, and hears the Commandant having a disagreement with Dada Goodblood, the leader of the NDF. When the Commandant ends the radio conversation, he turns to Agu and explains that sometimes even the best leaders must know when to follow orders. Agu, eager to please, repeats that he is a "good follower," even as the Commandant promises to make him like a leader. His promise, however, seems to come with a price, as the Commandant entreats Agu to keep a "secret" and then rapes him. When Strika sees Agu emerge from the Commandant's housing he

rushes to Agu's side and supports him as he struggles to walk. No words are exchanged. Strika clearly understands what has happened, having previously occupied Agu's favored position. After this encounter, Agu slips into silence, unable to explain to older soldiers "what is the matter with [him]." When Agu does emerge from his silence it is under the influence of drugs and the relentless rhythm of daily life in the NDF.

This first silence, while powerful, is short and dreamlike. Seen largely from Agu's perspective, the scenes where he refrains from speaking appear slightly distorted and out of focus. The same cannot be said for Agu's silence after Strika's death. In a tense scene, Agu stands before the Commandant. Before he can announce his intent to leave, Preacher (the man who replaces the original 2-I-C as second in command) approaches the Commandant and announces that he is leaving--that he can't fight a war with no bullets to shoot his enemy, no food, and no water. Agu nods at what Preacher says, but when others come streaming forward Agu raises his gun as if to defend the Commandant, only to realize that he, too, wants to leave. The Commandant berates those who want to leave and Agu's gun wavers in indecision. When Preacher raises his empty gun to the Commandant Agu does the same. Even when the Commandant takes Agu's gun and presses it to his own chest, goading Agu to kill him, while Preacher whispers, "Do it, Agu" Agu is silent. He does not yield to Preacher's urging or the Commandant's goading. His indecision is his own, and his refusal to follow anyone else's command is a statement made in silence. It is not until the Commandant presses his own gun to Agu's head and, crouched at Agu's eye level, repeats over and over "You want to surrender?" that Agu speaks a single word, "Yes." The scene is reminiscent of the scene in which Agu is conscripted to the NDF, only this time Agu finds his own words. He does not silently nod or shout as the

Commandant urges him to, but rather offers one quiet response. It is this one response that leads the Commandant to cast out Agu and his fellows. Agu stays besides the Commandant after everyone has begun to leave and, when the Commandant turns his back to shout dark promises of imprisonment at the fleeing troops, Agu walks away. Agu's one affirmation is the last word spoken by any member of the battalion until Preacher declares to UN soldiers that he and his company are NDF soldiers wishing to surrender.

Reframing Silence

The end of the film finds Agu in a rehabilitation camp, where multiple adults speak at Agu. A male teacher speaks to Agu alone in the classroom. He asks how Agu is settling in and reminds him that he has been where Agu is, implying that he, too, was a child soldier. Agu stares up at him and says nothing. A voiceover comes in where Agu explains that he does not know how long he will stay where he is. The camera shows a montage of Agu's life, his meals, his tossing and turning in the night as he narrates his thoughts of the smell of dead bodies and of drugs. When the montage ends, it is to the sound of chanting as members of the rehabilitation camp throw tables onto a bonfire, crying that they are being fed poison. When Preacher tells Agu and another boy that the war is not over, and that staying in a place like they are requires money, Agu is the silent counterpart to his companion, only chiming in "Yeah," when his companion has made his point. However, it is Agu who turns to another boy and pleads with him not to follow Preacher back into the bush. Despite his pleas, Agu's words fall on deaf ears, acknowledged only with a slight pause before the boy, Randy, follows Preacher. Though

Agu's internal monologue plays clearly in the voiceover, the few words he speaks out loud seem to have lost power since he left the Commandant's camp. His powerful affirmation of his desire to leave that sets the soldiers free seems a distant memory in the context of the nearly silent boy.

In a final scene of confrontation between Agu and an adult, Agu is speaking to a young female counselor, Amy. In voiceover, Agu explains, "Amy. She thinks that my not speaking is because I can't be explaining myself like baby, but I am not like baby. I am like old man and she's like small girl because I am fighting in war and she's not even knowing what war is." During Agu's voiceover Amy's lips continue to move, her words silent as Agu explains her ignorance, looking at her out of the corners of his eyes. The voiceover ends and Amy, seeming to confirm Agu's accusations, incites, "Try. Try to talk to me about some of your experiences... or try to tell me what you are thinking." With great reluctance, Agu reveals that he is thinking about his future, but questions about his future inevitably lead back to his past. In response to her plea that telling her will make him feel better, Agu tells her:

"I saw terrible things... and I did terrible things. So if I'm talking to you, it will make me sad... and it will make you, too, sad. In this life... I just want to be happy in this life. If I am telling this to you, you will think that... I am some sort of beast or devil. I am all of these things... but I also having mother... father... brother and sister once. They loved me."

Agu, now embodying the Mute, the Familiar, and The Narrator, confesses that he cannot be soothed or fully understood. He is recognizable for his shared experience with other child soldiers and thus he is a Familiar to both the viewer and his counselor, Amy, but he

refuses to yield his experiences for review and perusal. Rather, he hides them in his words and phrases, tucked between his silences and mistrustful stares. For Agu, his future is mixed with his past, his crimes and his fight for what he believed to be justice are bound together, and his childhood and the legacy of what he had and the love that formed him cannot be separated from who he is as a "beast or devil."

Conclusion

As Emma Wilson argues in "Children, emotion and viewing in contemporary European film," many modern films have begun to blur the division between adults and children by playing on the effects of feelings of helplessness on the viewer. Wilson states that films that focus on evoking powerful affect have an infantilizing effect on the viewer: "The adult, overwhelmed by experience, by emotions of intensity of either negative or positive affect, in the very experience of being overwhelmed involuntarily returns to the child's state of helplessness (motor, emotional, or political)" (330). In this configuration, to witness a child (or even an adult) in crisis is potentially to be brought back to a time when one was equally as vulnerable. The need the viewer feels to protect the child in distress is also the need to protect one's self. Such empathic experience of the plights of children in war films is at once a powerful tool for engaging with the realities of war and violence and a potentially dangerously soporific that allows the viewer to separate the fictional or past plights of the child on-screen from the continued effects of such violence in the world off-screen. The three films examined in this thesis circumvent the potential for viewer complacency by actively engaging the viewer and implicating her in the events of the film using the shared grounds of the Familiar as a point of entry/crossover between the filmic and extra-filmic world and tying it to profound revelations on the part of the Mute.

The strength of the films under examination in this thesis is in part their willingness to abide ambiguity. None of the three films offer assurances of safety or even clear resolutions. *The Spirit of the Beehive* ends with Ana poised on the edge of a balcony bathed in moonlight, possibly "summoning" the spirit (the Familiar) as a companion and

possibly departing with it. Her future and adulthood are unclear, and despite the doctor's assurance to the contrary to Teresa, the way that Ana will internalize the underbelly of violence that she uncovered at work in her home is nearly impossible to forecast. *Grave of the Fireflies*, too, ends with children poised on the border between worlds: Seita and Setsuko, still ghosts, still alone, sit on a hill and watch the glowing city before them, neither peacefully disappearing nor actively haunting, rather exerting the power of their gaze over the living without comment on what they see. Even Agu, a character situated in the ostensibly safe rehabilitation camp, promises neither his happiness nor his recovery to the viewer. He acknowledges the children that return to the bush, and though he states that he wants to be happy, he also acknowledges that he himself is a haunted subject, clinging to the family he once had and unable to deny the violence that he has committed.

In refusing to commit to a clear resolution or to promise the safety or peace of the children who are the subjects of their films, the directors demand that the viewer internalize the children's experiences and take on the responsibility of housing the questions raised by the Mute within herself. The viewer must internalize the process of questioning her own narratives and (re)viewing the legacies of violence and trauma in her own life. This is not to argue that the viewer takes on the traumas of the filmic children, but rather to assert that the films challenge the viewer to search for the silences in their own narratives regarding war and trauma (theirs and others') in an attempt to uncover the emotive responses to- and understandings of war that the viewer takes for granted. The failure to recognize the ambiguity of the roles that children play in the viewer's own conceptions of the past and the future otherwise condemns the viewer to living trapped

between extremes, hungrily desiring a version of the child that can never truly exist alongside the living child.

Both children and subjects of trauma are difficult to encapsulate in literature. Trauma, for its disruptive persistence in dragging the past into the present and children for what Honeyman indicates is their imperfect participation in the linguistic sphere. Authors such as Marianne Hirsch have examined the ways in which trauma's complexity can in part be visualized via palimpsest in art, but for all that children are not an abstract topic, they have received significantly more limited treatment as subjects outside of overtly philosophical meditations on the nature of childhood. Many authors of fiction have attempted to capture the voices of child-narrators both in first and third person, but there is very little work that engages children as their own representatives in no small part because there is little interest in reading poorly formatted prose and little inclination to value haltingly articulated stories. The medium of film presents a unique opportunity for children to represent themselves in a more comprehensive manner. Though they are still actors in another's story (be it the director's story or the writer's) children in film have the ability to be seen and to communicate both within and without adult discourse.

As subjects who must occupy another's narrative even (this in regards to parental authority, directorial instructions, and written stories) even as they attempt to sort out what role they are to play in the dramas of others, children are natural traversers of borderlands. Neither fully independent nor completely indivisible from their parents, caught between silence and sophisticated articulation, children must constantly traverse the spaces between discourses. The children in the films discussed in this thesis gain power and voice not by conforming wholly to adult standards of discourse (as

represented by the Narrator) but rather by complicating the viewer's relationship to their expectations of children and of war via the act of questioning and denaturalizing the ideological landscapes whose natures the viewer takes for granted.

At the same time, one must approach filmic children with caution, as Freud suggests one approach what he refers to as "screen memories"--'memories' crystallized from a mixture of past experiences and projections of emotion and imaginings of childhood by the individual onto her own past. Though there is no arguing against the fact that children exist and live and function in the same world as adults, childhood itself does not. Adult narratives about children and childhood in the form of film must not be misunderstood as true representations of children or childhood. Despite the way that the cinema places the viewer in a phantasy of wholeness and potency, the viewer must not mistake the figure in the mirror (or the world on the screen) as separate from the caster of the reflection. To do so is to fail to confront the surplus insight offered by the Familiar and to regress instead into the placatory fantasy of mastery that the pre-revelation figures of the Narrator and Familiar represent.

The Narrator, the Mute, and the Familiar are not archetypes to be used as easy interpretive tools for understanding children in war films. Rather, they represent processes of critical engagement with subjects of childhood and trauma. The figures treated in this thesis should be understood as akin to unresolved allegories, like Fernando's musings on the beehive, with fluid functions and insights. The Narrator, the Mute, and the Familiar are meant to act as pathways to insight about the viewer and her relationship to phantasies about the past and future symbolized by her relationship with projections of children and childhood. The interpretation of their roles and appearances is

descriptive, not prescriptive. In this way, this thesis offers insight into the roles of children in *The Spirit of the Beehive*, *Grave of the Fireflies*, and *Beasts of No Nation* as a leaping point for questioning current conceptions of agency and citizenship within a world where citizenship is bound by obligations to subjects that exist not as agents but rather as loci of fantasy--children.

Appendix



Figure 1 The cover of *Paris Match* that Barthes discusses in "Myth Today." Credit: courses.nus.edu.sg



Figure 2: A compilation of posters for *Beasts of No Nation*. Top: Idris Elba as the Commandant. Bottom: Abraham Attah as Agu. Credit: uproxx.files.wordpress.com



Figure 3: The first shot of *Beasts of No Nation*, children in Agu's village playing framed by a TV with no screen.

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