

Enduring The Unendurable

Examining Cultural Trauma in Postwar Japanese Film

Joseph Worstall

Opening Questions

- Following WWII, Japanese cinema rapidly began to gain international acclaim. However, we've tended to gloss over the unique ways in which many postwar films reflected on and grappled with Japan's wartime experiences. What statements were their creators trying to make?
- In the 20th century, film became regarded as a serious art form—notably, one which could be consumed by the masses. How did these films resonate with their vast audiences?
- How do cultural traumas arise? How are they overcome, if at all?
- Can an engagement with creative media fill in the gaps left by factual analysis?

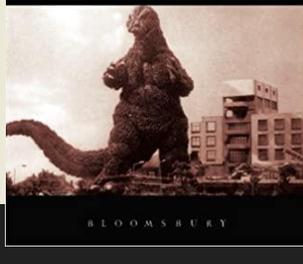
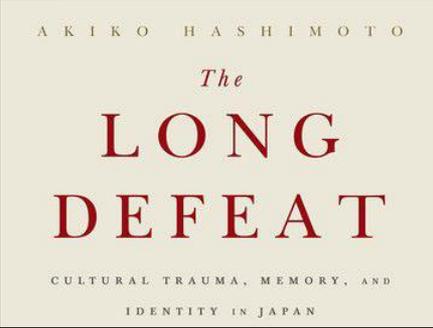
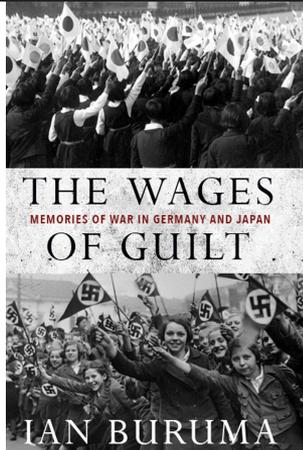
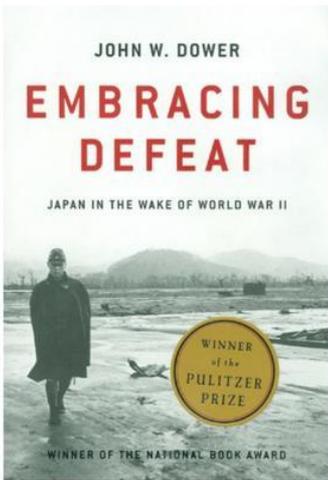


Established Answers



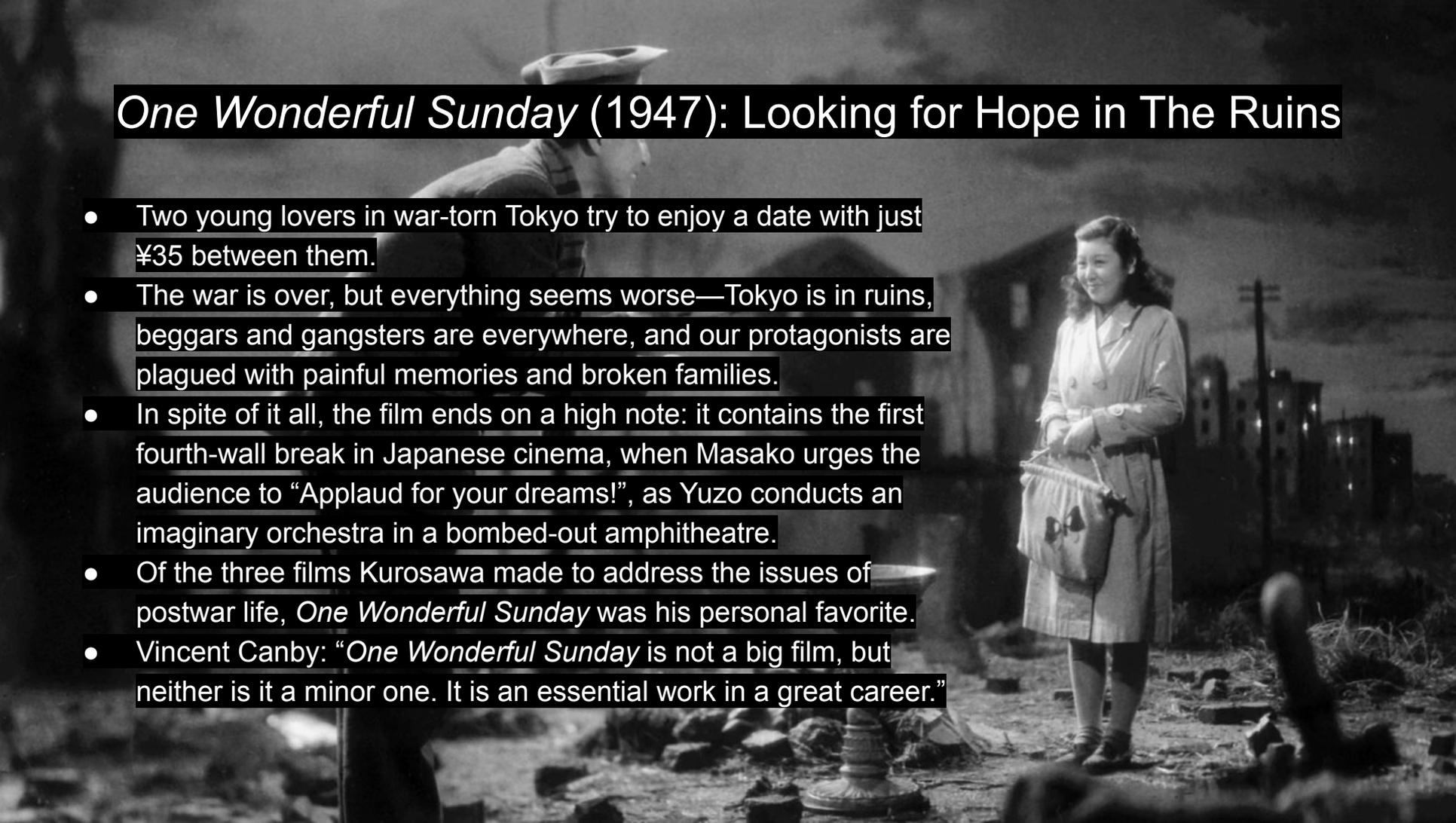
- There is no definitive answer to this first question: different filmmakers make different statements, and it's impossible to homogenize a singular response.
- Generally, these films were beloved in their native country upon release. However, it would take decades before Americans viewed them uncensored. Responses varied.
- Cultural traumas arise "...when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness." They are rarely fully overcome within the time span of living memory.
- There is no single consensus within academia on the role of artistic analysis in examining cultural traumas—it tends to vary by discipline.

Source Material



Japanese Nightmares, American Dreams

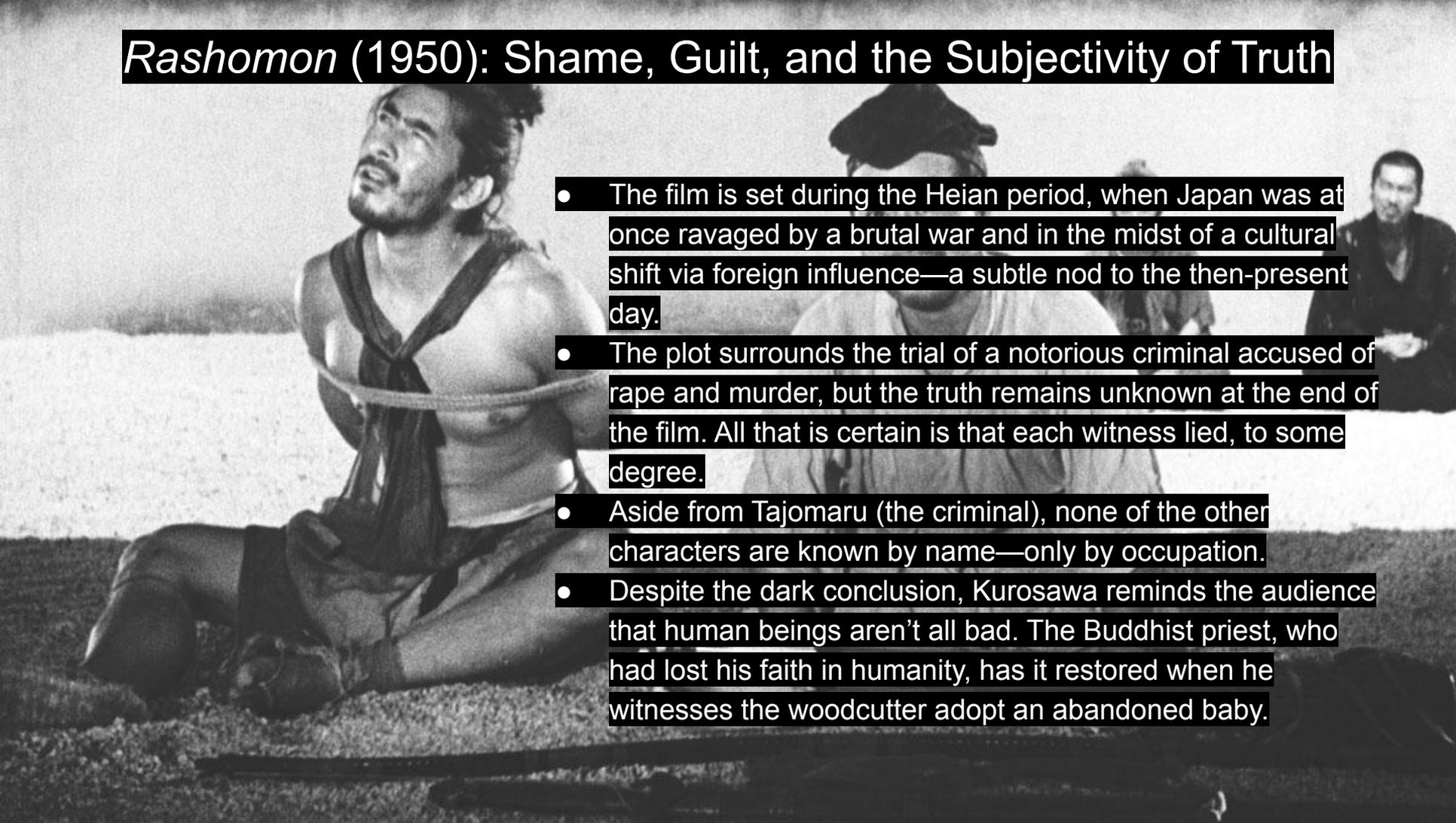
- In the absence of economic stability, the Yakuza rose through the creation of their own black markets.
- Deaths from starvation and exposure became so common that newspapers began listing monthly statistics on them in major cities.
- Victims of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki continued dying of radiation poisoning several months after the bombings, baffling doctors who never dealt with such a condition.
- Unemployment crisis after the termination of war-related jobs led to unprecedented rates of poverty.
- 虚脱状態/The Kyodatsu Condition: Originally a colloquialism for anxious-depressive disorders—after the war, it referred to the general sense of exhaustion and disaffection felt by much of the population.
- 15,000,000 Japanese people were homeless at the end of 1945, with 1,000,000+ in the Tokyo area alone.
- Hundreds of thousands of children with dead/missing parents—and little infrastructure to support them.
- Nevertheless, the U.S. occupation forces had high hopes for Japan.



One Wonderful Sunday (1947): Looking for Hope in The Ruins

- Two young lovers in war-torn Tokyo try to enjoy a date with just ¥35 between them.
- The war is over, but everything seems worse—Tokyo is in ruins, beggars and gangsters are everywhere, and our protagonists are plagued with painful memories and broken families.
- In spite of it all, the film ends on a high note: it contains the first fourth-wall break in Japanese cinema, when Masako urges the audience to “Applaud for your dreams!”, as Yuzo conducts an imaginary orchestra in a bombed-out amphitheatre.
- Of the three films Kurosawa made to address the issues of postwar life, *One Wonderful Sunday* was his personal favorite.
- Vincent Canby: “*One Wonderful Sunday* is not a big film, but neither is it a minor one. It is an essential work in a great career.”

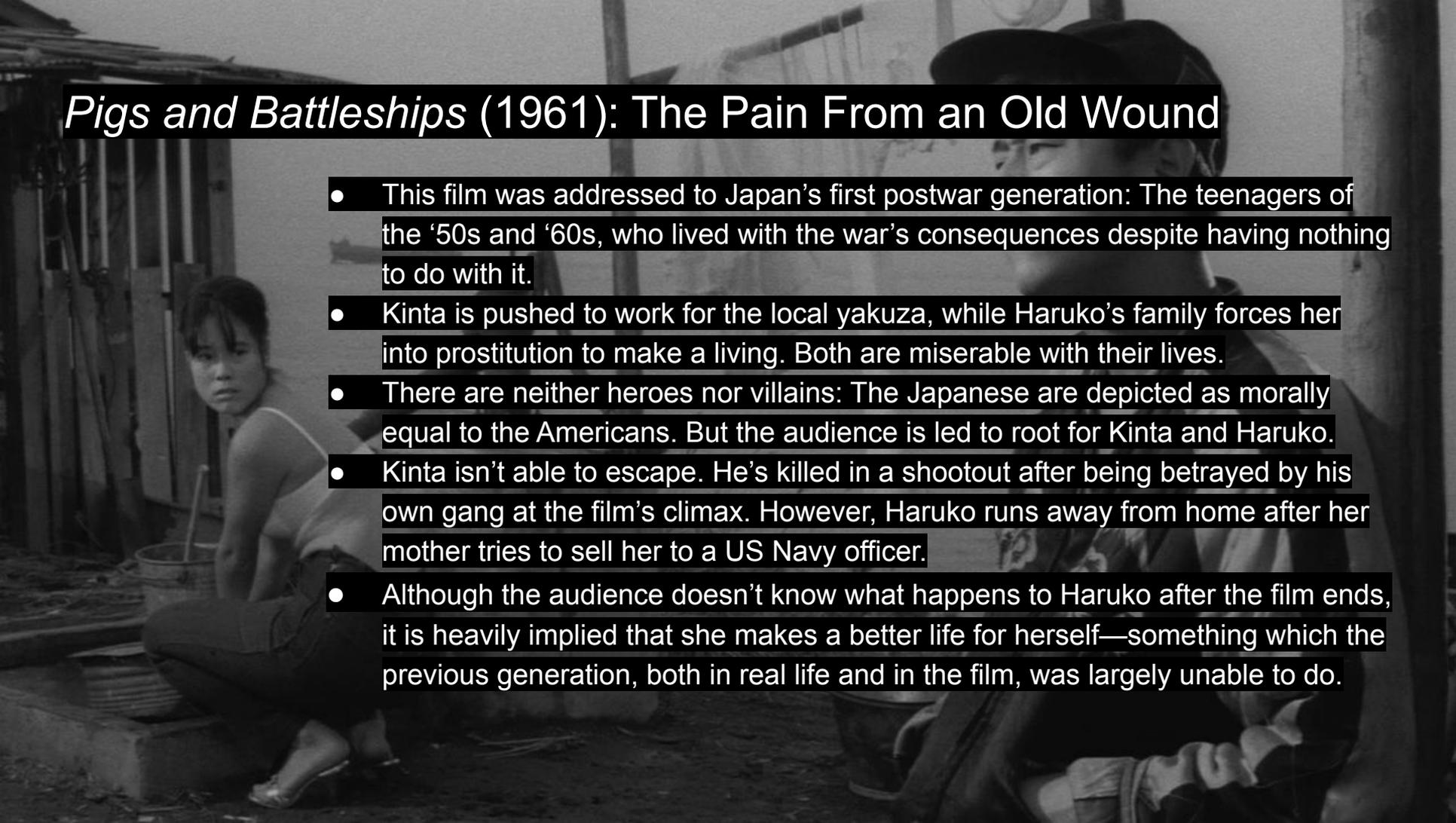
Rashomon (1950): Shame, Guilt, and the Subjectivity of Truth

- 
- The film is set during the Heian period, when Japan was at once ravaged by a brutal war and in the midst of a cultural shift via foreign influence—a subtle nod to the then-present day.
 - The plot surrounds the trial of a notorious criminal accused of rape and murder, but the truth remains unknown at the end of the film. All that is certain is that each witness lied, to some degree.
 - Aside from Tajomaru (the criminal), none of the other characters are known by name—only by occupation.
 - Despite the dark conclusion, Kurosawa reminds the audience that human beings aren't all bad. The Buddhist priest, who had lost his faith in humanity, has it restored when he witnesses the woodcutter adopt an abandoned baby.

Gojira (1954): Persecution of The Masses

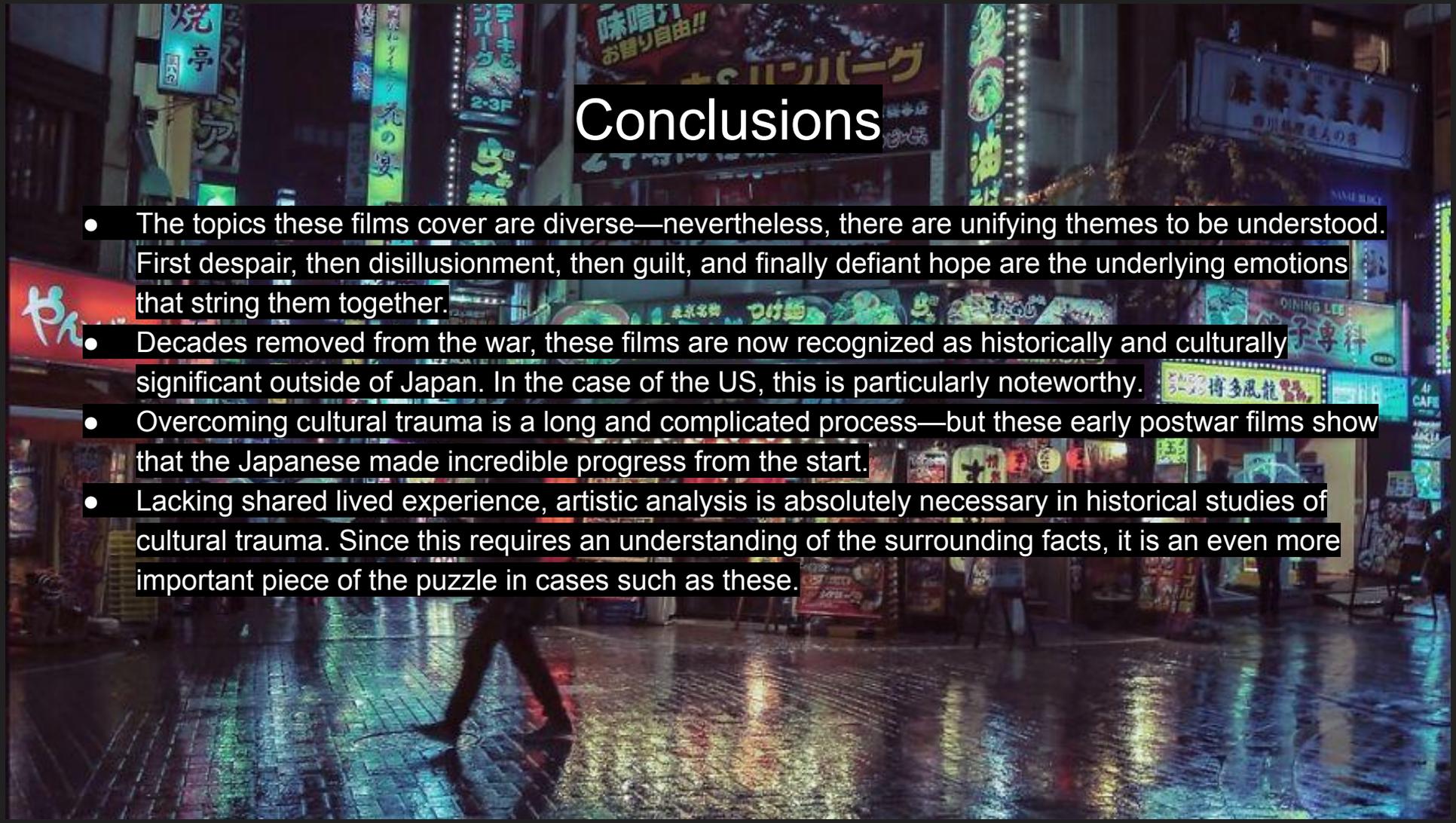
- The film was released just months after Japan was shaken by the Lucky Dragon 5 disaster, when a small Japanese fishing vessel was accidentally caught within fallout range of the Castle Bravo nuclear test—an event which is symbolized by Godzilla's first attack at the start of the film.
- Godzilla himself is a living manifestation of nuclear war, as exemplified by his keloid-covered skin and the trace radiation left in his wake.
- Godzilla's rampages are indiscriminate. Repeatedly, the film focuses on shots of overwhelmed hospitals and panicked civilians.
- Godzilla is defeated in an act of sacrifice. By taking his own life, Dr. Serizawa assures that his super-weapon will never be used again.
- At the end, a colleague of Serizawa reminds the audience that humanity's hubris created Godzilla: Preventing a similar tragedy would require the end of nuclear testing.





Pigs and Battleships (1961): The Pain From an Old Wound

- This film was addressed to Japan's first postwar generation: The teenagers of the '50s and '60s, who lived with the war's consequences despite having nothing to do with it.
- Kinta is pushed to work for the local yakuza, while Haruko's family forces her into prostitution to make a living. Both are miserable with their lives.
- There are neither heroes nor villains: The Japanese are depicted as morally equal to the Americans. But the audience is led to root for Kinta and Haruko.
- Kinta isn't able to escape. He's killed in a shootout after being betrayed by his own gang at the film's climax. However, Haruko runs away from home after her mother tries to sell her to a US Navy officer.
- Although the audience doesn't know what happens to Haruko after the film ends, it is heavily implied that she makes a better life for herself—something which the previous generation, both in real life and in the film, was largely unable to do.



Conclusions

- The topics these films cover are diverse—nevertheless, there are unifying themes to be understood. First despair, then disillusionment, then guilt, and finally defiant hope are the underlying emotions that string them together.
- Decades removed from the war, these films are now recognized as historically and culturally significant outside of Japan. In the case of the US, this is particularly noteworthy.
- Overcoming cultural trauma is a long and complicated process—but these early postwar films show that the Japanese made incredible progress from the start.
- Lacking shared lived experience, artistic analysis is absolutely necessary in historical studies of cultural trauma. Since this requires an understanding of the surrounding facts, it is an even more important piece of the puzzle in cases such as these.

Broader Lessons



- In the study of history, it's important to recognize that creative media is capable of making statements which fact-based research alone is ill-equipped to deliver.
- The documentation of first-hand accounts shouldn't be taken for granted. The generations whose lived experiences are preserved in these films are rapidly fading away, and we still have much to learn from them.
- To appreciate the art, first understand the source. My respect for these films deepened significantly as a result of this project, and it's largely because I now feel greater empathy for their creators and the millions of people they spoke on behalf of.