Reviews

Films

Kyoko Miyake, Director, *Surviving the Tsunami—My Atomic Aunt*

Japan/Germany, 2013. 52 Minutes, Color. Inselfilm Produktion. $89.00 (K-12, public libraries, and select groups); $350.00 (universities, colleges, and institutions). www.wmm.com

It has been half a decade now since the 11 March 2011 earthquake and tsunami flattened coastal communities in northeast Japan, leaving nearly 20,000 people dead. About 300,000 people were evacuated from the area surrounding the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, where a series of nuclear accidents and meltdowns had set off the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. Many evacuees may never return, as radiation contamination rendered parts of Fukushima prefecture uninhabitable. While decommissioning work is expected to last some thirty to forty years, the Japanese government has since authorized the restart of nuclear reactors in Sendai, Kagoshima Prefecture, and Takahama in Fukui Prefecture. In spite of the costs for decommissioning and other liabilities—bills are exceeding $100 billion as of spring 2016—and regardless of public opposition against nuclear energy, Japan's national energy strategy aims to restart old nuclear reactors, and to build new ones. According to a survey by the wire service Kyodo News from March 2014, less than 10 percent of the authorities in communities situated within a thirty kilometer radius of the four dozen nuclear reactors in Japan support this nuclear renaissance, regardless of the subsidies that their communities would receive by keeping their power plants online (Kingston 2016, 59–60; 62, 67, 71, 73).

Depopulated rural areas have been specifically chosen as sites for nuclear power plants in Japan (Aldrich 2008). Namie, a small community in Fukushima prefecture, was no exception to this rule. The town was selected for a new power plant by the utility giant tepco, the Tokyo Electric Power Company. The majority of local residents, among them the relatives of scholar and filmmaker Kyoko Miyake, had supported nuclear energy to keep their community alive. As with other rural communities, Namie

had long been shrinking and aging. The prospect of subsidies and job opportunities provided by the nuclear industry had motivated negotiations with TEPCO over decades. However, the March 2011 disasters turned Namie into a ghost town. All residents had to abandon their homes due to high levels of radiation exposure.

In her compelling film *Surviving the Tsunami—My Atomic Aunt*, Kyoko Miyake documents ways in which her relatives from Namie are coming to terms with the Fukushima nuclear disaster. Miyake, the director, writer, and narrator, spent more than a decade in the U.K., where she originally studied the history of English witchcraft at Oxford University before she became a filmmaker. In *My Atomic Aunt*, Miyake remembers Namie as her childhood paradise, where she spent carefree summer holidays with her family. Her aunt Kuniko lived a mere eight kilometers away from the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. In revisiting Namie in the wake of 3.11, the author challenges her idealized memories in a search for answers for why former residents of Namie hesitated to express their anger against TEPCO. Over a period of sixteen months, Miyake follows Kuniko to chronicle her transformation from a TEPCO supporter into what could be termed an anti-nuclear activist. The viewer receives an in-depth portrayal of Kuniko as she copes with the loss of her home and livelihood. Kuniko comes to a slow realization that TEPCO and the government were overwhelmed and unprepared for the Fukushima crisis. Feelings of guilt, responsibility, and anxiety about the future also emerge. The film poignantly unravels complex problems confronting the victims who had previously downplayed the risks of nuclear energy as they promoted the construction of a nuclear power plant in their own neighborhood. It illustrates multi-generational affiliations between her family and TEPCO, the dynamics of nuclear propaganda, individual feelings of abandonment, and negotiations of a post-disaster identity.

The strength of this film lies within Kyoko Miyake's self-reflexivity, and in the portrayal of Kuniko, who ran a funeral parlor, a wedding salon, and a patisserie in Namie before the disasters. Miyake remembers her aunt as a busy working woman who has always been an entrepreneur, and someone who served as her personal role model. Considering that every characterization on film is a selective construction, however, I find Miyake's potrayal of her aunt a bit exoticizing at times. Running a wedding salon, a funeral parlor, and a patisserie is described by the narrator as "an odd mix, even by Japanese standards" (03:30–03:42). I do not find this description adequate. Mutual-aid societies (*gojokai*) that charge membership fees for discounted wedding and funeral services, for example, are widespread in Japan. These societies developed in response to declining community participation in the organization of funerals and weddings in the postwar era (ROWE 2000, 355; SUZUKI 2000, 53–56). Kuniko's business emerged as a logical service provider for products used within funeral ceremonies, such as coffins, flowers, and sweets. The professionalization of mortuary services in modern funeral halls (*saijō*) consolidated the material, temporal, and spatial elements of mortuary rites, thus enabling individualized departures that reflect contemporary economic realities and social norms. The rise of the wedding industry followed a similar pattern (see ROWE 2000, 354–57).

In defining Kuniko by her entrepreneurial "otherness," and in depicting her work as quirky or odd, the film generates a lighthearted mood in the face of adversity. The

endearing and humorous comments of Kuniko form a contrast to her expressions of grief and sadness, which increase as the story unfolds. The aunt's indomitable desire to work forms an important theme throughout the film, and becomes a marker for recovery. In the final scene, we see her discussing a potential new venue for a funeral parlor with her husband, somewhere outside the no-go zone. I find this scene beautiful. However, we are left unclear about how this "happy end" is achieved. Did Kuniko and her husband receive compensation from TEPCO, or aid through other means? The film addresses the lack of support by TEPCO and the government generally, and also reflects on the age gap between elderly residents who have chosen to stay in Fukushima and younger people who moved away. But the ways in which interpersonal connections and financial standing influence individual experiences of disaster and recovery are at no point made explicit. While I find this point regrettable, it should not be forgotten that *My Atomic Aunt* was shot within the first sixteen months of the crisis, not five years on. The gap between those who were able to start their lives over and those who were not has since widened. Overall, the multitude of topics that the film explores in less than an hour is impressive, and the tangible, on-the-ground perspective of life in post-disaster Fukushima is moving and educational.

My Atomic Aunt is a highly accessible film, well rounded, and complex in its multilayered blending of individual and social dimensions of disaster. The author's haunting self-reflexivity in tension with the focus on her aunt challenges essentialist views on Japanese society in subtle, often entertaining ways. In sharing her experience on film, Kyoko Miyake invites viewers to observe and learn from the trauma that her family is facing, while at the same time her reflections on the Fukushima nuclear disaster may sharpen our view of society at large. The film addresses a wide range of social problems beyond 3.11 in Japan, including rural depopulation in the course of declining fishery and agricultural industries, as well as issues pertaining to aging and gender. I would highly recommend *My Atomic Aunt* for classroom use, especially for courses on Japanese religion and society.

References

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