

The Erasure of Collective Memory about War in The Big O : A Case of the Fictional Paradigm City

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“The Erasure of Collective Memory about War in *The Big O*: A Case of the Fictional Paradigm City”

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This article examines the psychological rewards and punishments of forgetting traumatic memories about war within the context of the Japan’s postwar era, focusing on the postwar history of Hiroshima. This article focuses on lost memories and examines stories told in the Japanese science fiction anime series *The Big O* as a way to reimagine how people negotiate with traumatic memories of calamity. It addresses anime as a viable medium to explain about Japanese war memories. Anime is an art form that expresses unspoken culture, norms, frustrations, and social issues that society produces. Anime is also an alternative way to raise an awareness about controversial subjects that the public seldom discuss (Cavalier, 2011; Yokota and Hu, 2014). Taking these notions into consideration, an analysis of anime can provide us a general understanding about rewards and punishments of the erasure of memories about war in contemporary society. Thus, anime can offer a negotiating meaning of the past. More importantly, war memories are contentious because various versions of war memory have been written by diverse societies in different times. In a case of Japan, war memories have remained as a controversial issue since the nation lost the Second World War.

The main theme of *The Big O* is the amnesia associated with war memories. *The Big O* is based on the same title of manga written by Hitoshi Ariga, and the television version of the story is directed by Kazuyoshi Katayama and produced by the anime studio Sunrise released in 1999 in Japan and in 2001 in the United States.

Many science fiction anime programs deal with memory as a main theme. However, *The Big O* is particularly different from other science fiction anime such as Katsuhiro Otomo’s *Memories: Magnetic Rose* (1995), which depicts female protagonist’s personal memory and obsession with the loss of her loved one. Contrary to *Memories: Magnetic Rose*, *The Big O* expresses multiple beliefs surrounding memory on social and personal levels, including the loss of social, collective memories. This is done by discussing how the loss of memories is negotiated and understood. Thus, the story offers diverse versions of memory such as collective memories on the one hand, and personal and nostalgic memories on the other hand. The most significant aspect of *The Big O* is to overtly discuss struggles with the meaning of the past. Particularly, the protagonist’s wish to recall his lost memories yet

later forget the past as a way to reconcile with war he participated.

The Big O is set in a fictional world called Paradigm City, where all memories vanished from the city forty years after the city was demolished by an unspecified war. Paradigm City is called the city of amnesia because Paradigm residents also lost their personal memories. The principal protagonist Roger Smith, who is a young adult, searches for his lost memories. He wishes to know what happened in the past. He is a negotiator and deals with various memory issues in Paradigm City. While doing his business, he faces various difficulties in learning the truth of the past and then suffers hallucinatory nightmares related to war. Gradually, he grows a sense of fear about confronting the past and later decides he no longer wants to recall his memories because he thinks that they would be too unpleasant for him to face. As a result, he wants to erase memories that would negatively affect his identity. On the other hand, he wishes to recreate his own memories in order to live positively in the present. Overall, the twenty-six episodes consist of Roger's initial quest for his lost memories as a way to understand his identity, but then later his desire to recreate his new identity for himself by choosing not to remember the past.

This article assumes that the storyline in *The Big O* perhaps reflects the actual postwar trajectory of Japanese memories about the Second World War, when the nation was devastated, causing many of the populace to later suffer from traumatic memories of atomic bombs and then amnesia (Bailey, 1996). Given this historical context, the plot of *The Big O* has a more profound meaning when read in reference to the larger context of Japan's forgotten and, untold memories associated with the atomic bombs during the Second World War. For instance, geographical features of ground zero in Hiroshima are a piece of land surrounded by two rivers, which are the Ota River and the Aoi River. The fictional Paradigm City is also surrounded by a body of water that is visually and geographically reminiscent of the ground zero in Hiroshima. Moreover, the body of water also alludes to Manhattan in New York, which indicates the Manhattan Project or the birth of nuclear bombs. These two indicative locations are deeply significant in terms of nuclear bombing because Hiroshima was subjected to the dropping of the bombs for the Manhattan Project. Such inklings of atomic bombs are critically important aspects of discussions about lost memories in *The Big O*. In addition, there are several domes in Paradigm City, symbolizing the remain of Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima. Finally, Paradigm City's memories had been deleted prior to the story's beginning, which is similar to what happened to Hiroshima's postwar history. For example, people usually do not discuss the wartime history of Hiroshima, where many factories under the Japanese Imperial Army used many forced laborers from Korea. In other words, wartime memories of Hiroshima are excluded within a general understanding of the city among the public. In a sense, Paradigm City in *The Big O* is a fictional representation of Hiroshima, which suggests the general context of postwar suffering and the subsequent repression of memories of war experiences. Referring to the historical contexts.

The Big O challenges the polemical, deeply-rooted issue of Japan.

This article conducts a close textual analysis of *The Big O* as a way to understand the complicated reconciliations with such lost memories, including memories about defeat of an unspecified war. It commences with memory theories followed by an analysis of *The Big O*, focusing on the rewards and punishments of remembering and forgetting memories. By examining selective dialogues between two main characters, this article discusses how their negotiations with traumatic memories echo the way in which Japan has attempted to reconcile with memories of war in the latter half of the twentieth century. Specifically, the story focuses on how war memories are forgotten in Paradigm City, which is a postwar society, and how people wish to remember war memories. The story claims that it is better to forget lost memories and raises a lot of questions about how memories are forgotten and remembered.

MEMORY THEORY

Toward the twenty-first century, many scholars paid attention to collective memory as a way to capture the transitional phase of society, politics, and people (Morris-Suzuki, 2005; Misztal, 2010). Collective memory is collectively remembered historical events, which are not only historical knowledge but also largely agreed upon by and shared among certain members of a society. Collective memory is self-consciously created in order for people of today to preserve certain memories about historical facts (Halbwachs, 1992). In other words, each social group creates their own collective memory. Such memory is socially constructed for present audiences as representations of the past. For this reason, collective memory appears in various cultural artifacts such as books, films, pictures, cartoons, newspaper articles, and commodities for today’s consumers (Schudson, 1995). In a sense, collective memory is not natural but artificial (Nora, 1996). Within memory studies, two major arguments about collective memory are particularly useful in understanding memories: remembrance and forgetting.

First, arguments in favor of remembrance emphasize that memory should be remembered by present people as the foundation of identity (Misztal, 2010; Huyssen, 1995). Remembering the past fosters a sense of the self, providing the idea about who we were in the past and who we are in the present (Huyssen, 1995). For instance, remembering shared memories within a community can cultivate a collective identity by sharing common joys and sorrows that strengthen emotional connections. National holidays, Veteran’s day, and V-Day symbolize moments of blisses and honors within the particular context of the United States. By celebrating these holidays, Americans recall those historical events that can provide a sense of solidarity among them. In a way, it is important to have collective memories in order to unify each individual as one within society (Shils, 1981).

On the contrary, arguments in favor of forgetting claim benefits of forgetfulness as if some amount of historical amnesia is unavoidable to preserve collective memory (Misztal, 2010, p. 25; Connerton, 2008, p. 59). The arguments state that it is better to forget negative memories, particularly postwar, if memories create resentful feelings against former enemies. Remembering such memories hinders the development of democratic relationships with former enemies in the process of reconciliation (Elster, 1998). In a sense, forgetting is a way to negotiate with each social group's contentious past in order to reconstruct a better relationship in the future; hence, "forgetting is essential for the construction and maintenance of national solidarity and identity" (Misztal, 2010, p. 30). For these reasons, obliteration of war memory might be the best strategy to cope with difficult histories in particular contexts as a way to avoid controversy in the present (Connerton, 2008; Elster, 1998).

In sum, these opposing arguments surrounding memory are intertwined with the construction of collective memory, which is all about a selection of what we desire to remember and what we want to forget. Indeed, collective memory reflects social interests and desires of people of today, who have ability to decide what should be remembered and shape political landscape over history. In the process, memories are frequently redacted. In many occasions, memory brings up intensely polemical moments in the present. For instance, a narrative of World War II in American textbooks is different from one in Japanese textbooks because a different analysis of WWII can be possible. Therefore, we should be aware of that these two modes of memory influence collective memory.

ANALYSIS: *THE BIG O*

This article turns to an analysis of negotiations with lost memories by examining dialogues in the story told in *The Big O* using two primary characters, Roger, and the founder of Paradigm City Gordon Rosewater, who have different experiences negotiating war memories. First, Roger is a negotiator for those who are trying to remember memory in Paradigm City. He wants to remember the past; hence, he investigates lost memories. However, learning the truth of his lost memories is an unbearable pain for him. Roger undergoes multiple difficulties, including fear, identity crisis, self-doubt, and nightmares. Thus, he grows ambivalent feelings about his lost memories. In a sense, he plays a role of people who try to confront the past as a way to understand themselves.

In contrast to Roger, the founder of Paradigm City, Gordon Rosewater, who is an old retired politician, is not at all interested in telling the truth of the past, so he wants to forget everything he experienced. He strongly believes that memories about the horrors of war should be forgotten. Thus, Gordon desires to construct a utopian world where no horrible memories of war remain. He represents the typical wartime generation who never wants to recount negative memories to the younger generation.

Many episodes in *The Big O* negatively depict people who yearn for their lost memories but suffer when they try to do so. Then they recall memories as being negative, they end up being killed.

Episode 13 called ‘R.D.’ concerns a series of murder cases of young people, who recalled fragmentary memories from about forty years ago even though they were not yet born at that time. Roger finds that, in the past, Gordon conducted memory implant experiments, which old memories were implanted into some young orphans. All of the victims actually were grown up in the same orphanage in Paradigm City, and the victims of these murder cases were subjects of the experiments. Thus, once they recalled the past, they were killed. Roger investigates Gordon, who is involved in the murder cases. Roger asks, “Four of those who had remembered the past have already been killed. Why is this necessary?” (episode 13). Roger’s direct inquiry goes unanswered, however. Gordon would not tell anything about the past he knows to Roger. Overall, this episode reveals that remembering the past and searching for their lost memories are highly controversial in the story.

Moreover, recalling the truth of lost memories is not appreciated. In episode 4 called ‘Underground Terror,’ the character Roger investigates former journalist Michael Seebach, who advocates for the public’s right to know the truth of what happened in Paradigm City. But in the city of amnesia, Seebach’s journalistic ambition is dangerous. Seebach is excluded from the city by the authorities because he wants to change a culture from forgetting to remembering wartime memories. This episode begins with Seebach’s voiceover monologue; “Even without what happened forty years ago, man would still be a creature that fears the dark, I think. He averts his eyes from that fear, from the memory of his history, and acts as if he never had those memories in the first place” (episode 4). His monologue explains that fear is the major source that hinders people from learning the past. It also indicates that Paradigm City’s past is very dark, which provokes the fear of learning the truth. Hence, people want to forget such negative memories.

Episode 20 ‘Stripes’ begins by Roger’s nightmare, which later leads Roger to see Gordon again. Roger confesses his anxiety about and self-doubt due to his lost memories to Gordon. Roger says that the very foundation of who he believes himself to be is being shaken because of the loss of his memories. Gordon retorts, “why are you so obsessed with such intangible? If something isn’t here now, it’s the same as if it had never existed in the first place, wouldn’t you say?” (episode 20). Roger disagrees with it and keeps telling him that he wants to know about his lost memories (episode 20). In this meeting with Gordon, Roger’s investigation goes unanswered again. However, Gordon advises him that Roger is the one who negotiates with his lost memories by himself.

Gordon represents such a negotiation with war memories. One way of negotiation is to forget the past. Gordon believes that memories by their nature are unreliable because they exist in people’s minds. Because of the elusive nature of memories, they are even degenerated into something

fraudulent (episode 25). “People subconsciously create these fables called memories” (episode 25). Indeed, Gordon’s belief emphasizes the notion that people imagine the past and then create a story based on the past. In a sense, memory is artificial and often unreliable.

In the penultimate episode, Gordon also reveals one of the facts of forty years ago; Gordon hired a Roger Smith to negotiate with the past (episode 25). His statement suggests that there were many people called Roger Smiths, who wished to learn the truth of the past. Among those, the main character Roger the negotiator was selected.

In the last episode, Roger finally addresses his negotiation with his lost memories that is influenced by willful forgetfulness. He says:

Memories are very precious for people’s lives. They let us prove to ourselves that we exist. And if we lose them, we have an unrelated feeling of insecurity...The humans living here and now in the present are made up of more than their memory of the past. I myself don’t even know who or what I am. I don’t have a single memory about myself. But I most likely erased them of my own free will. I was the one who made that choice. I made it for myself, so I can live in the present and the future (episode 26).

In his final statement, Roger’s attitude toward his lost memories shifts from his obsession with his lost memories to the elimination of them. The compelling point in the statement is that he justifies his forgetting in order to live in the present, stressing his will to delete all of his memories if necessary. His final reconciliation with his lost memories alludes to Jon Elster’s and Paul Connerton’s notions of memory, which is forgetting is the best way to build a new identity, life, and society after a war. Thus, Roger’s decision to forget is a typical reconciliation with war memories for people who have experienced trauma. This can be a reward for forgetting memories. In other words, remembering negative memories can be a punishment.

Besides, Roger’s negotiation celebrates a liberal, progressive idea about memory, which emphasizes rewriting the past. Huyssen states that a liberal, progressive idea about memory claims the importance of memory to understand the meaningfulness of life. It also stresses the freedom from the past in order to recreate new oneself and society.

In *The Big O*, this progressive notion is visually expressed at the last of the series. Paradigm City’s war-torn landscape disappears again, and everything turns white, signifying that recent memories of Paradigm City vanish again and then a blank slate that indicates the state of amnesia appears again. The end of this scene connotes the benefits of erasing negative memory because we can recreate their own new memories by themselves again (episode 26).

Overall, Roger and Gordon have initially different beliefs and negotiations with war memories. Both of them, conclude the same understanding of memory, which is to forget negative memories.

They repress their memories consciously or subconsciously. Roger has courage to confront negative memories, but after a long rumination about his lost memories, he believes that forgetting is the best strategy to heal past wounds from war. Roger mentions that “not all memories are pleasant” (episode 1), “memories appear unexpectedly” (episodes 2, 16, 25), “memory is a ghost from the past” (episode 14), and “people are not controlled by memory” (episode 26). On the other hand, Gordon considers that “memories exist in people’s minds” (episode 25), “memories are unreliable… fraudulent” (episode 25), and “there is no memory as long as people create” (episode 26). In sum, their dialogues and beliefs concerning lost memories are negative connotations. Hence, they need to forget the memories.

CONCLUSION

This article has discussed how fictional characters represent different beliefs concerning war memories and the attempt of forgetting traumatic war memories. The psychological rewards for forgetting traumatic memories are to unload the burden from the past. On the other hand, its punishments are suffering from unstable identity because those people who wish to forget the past indeed repress the past they experienced (Connerton, 2008). Because of such repression, they are actually entrapped by fear of recalling, culminating in self-doubt and anxiety at many levels in life.

There is controversy in discussing war memories. *The Big O* shows the intricacy of such negotiations with war memories and reveals an undercurrent of social issues surrounding memories, including unspoken social norms and cultures of forgetting that society produces. By overtly addressing them, *The Big O* offers various ways of reconciliations with and the understanding of difficult pasts.

In this article, four types of characters who deal with lost war memories were introduced: Roger, Gordon, Seebach, and the young victims. These types echo some true aspects of society. For Roger, his identity is unstable and undergoes constant feelings of anxiety while searching for his lost memories. Seeking lost memories is negative. Similarly, Seebach and the young victims are suffered by the culture of forgetting in postwar Paradigm City. Seebach attempts to change the culture of forgetting in postwar Paradigm City. The young victims represent the postwar generation’s right to know about the past, but their attempt is ruined. All of these characters can represent punishments of recalling lost memories.

On the other hand, the rewards of forgetting memories are to be free from the burden of the past. Gordon represents such a reward. He wants to reconcile with his war memories by not confronting the negative side of the past. Many studies show that people in postwar don’t want to talk about the

miserable experiences they had in order to live in the present (Connerton, 2008; Elster, 1998). They want to move on to the future. However, such erasure of memories is not a perfect solution for reconciliation with war memories. In fact, those who wish to forget the past do not forget it. They consciously or subconsciously repress the memories they experienced. Those memories do not go away but resurface in the present. In the story, Roger, who has nightmares, represents such a symptom of repressed memories. Moreover, the erasure of memory creates problems to the next generation, such as identity crisis and self-doubt. Throughout the story, *The Big O* raises such questions surrounding war memories and negotiations. Erasure of collective memory is impossible. Excluding certain memories from the public mind contributes to confusion of identity and self. That is the punishment of forgetting memories.

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