

# Mushrooms in the anime forest: When atomic explosions first appeared in Japanese TV series for children

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## 1. Introduction

Japanese animation for television began to be produced in 1963. Among the first successful genres there was science-fiction. In that and the two following decades, robots, cyborgs, spaceships and superheroes were the main weaponry around which the narratives unfolded.

Many sci-fi and adventure manga/anime of the postwar period were heavily conditioned by the topic of death and rebirth, defeat and regeneration, collective shame and gain of a new pride. A graphic motive in the 1970s became a recurring theme: the appearance of a ritual mushroom- or quasi-mushroom-shaped cloud. It appeared not only in serial anime but also in cinema anime, in films made for TV and in short auteur films until the late 1980s.

## 2. War, death and rebirth in sci-fi anime of the 1970s

From the WWII trauma, manga/anime creators came out with two grand narratives:

The first is a story of apocalypse and of the adults' failure: catastrophic events which a group of young orphan survivors struggles to rise from, in a fight for survival and the rebuilding of a new world. [...] The second traumatic scenario tells of the invasion of Japan (or the planet) by an alien species, piloting astonishing machines and vehicles, and opposed by Japanese teenager fighters, once again orphans, who win the war in their fathers' stead, driving giant robots or other war vehicles [...]. [Bouissou 2011: 41-2, Italian edition; the translation into English is mine]

A short list of the most successful sci-fi anime TV series aired from 1972 to 1980 shows how powerful these two grand narratives were. The most influential animation studios in science-fiction TV anime in the decade were Tōei Animation and Tōei Company, Tatsunoko Production, Nippon Sunrise, Academy Productions.

- 1972: *Kagaku Ninjatai Gatchaman, Mazinger Z, Astroganger*;
- 1973: *Shinzō Ningen Kasshern, Babil Nisei, Microid S*;
- 1974: *Great Mazinger, Uchū senkan Yamato, Getter Robo, Hurricane Polymer*;
- 1975: *UFO Robo Grendizer, Getter Robo G, Kotetsu Jeeg, Time Bokan, Uchū no kishi Tekkaman*;
- 1976: *Blocker Gundan IV Machine Blaster, Chō Denji Robo Comblatter V, Daikū Maryū Gaiking, Magne Robo Gakeen, Gowapper 5 Godam, Groizer X, UFO Senshi Diapolon*;
- 1977: *Voltes V, Muteki Chōjin Zanbot 3, Wakusei Robo Danguard A, Time Bokan Series: Yattaman, Chōjin Sentai Balatack, Chō Denshi Machine Voltes V, Gasshin Sentai Mechander Robo, Hyōga Senshi Guysluggar, Jetter Mars*;
- 1978: *Uchū kaizoku Captain Harlock, Captain Future, Ginga tetsudō 999, Mirai shōnen Konan, Muteki kōjin Daitarn 3, SF Saiyūki Starzinger, Toshō Daimos, Uchū majin Daikengō*;
- 1979: *Mirai Robo Daltanious, Tōshi Gordian, Kidō Senshi Gundam, Uchū Kūbo Blue Noah*;

1980: *Densetsu Kyōjin Ideon*, *Fumoon*, *Muteki Robot Trider G7*, *Tetsujin 28-go* (remake), *Time Bokan Series: Time Patrol Tai Otasukeman*, *Tondemo Senshi Muteking*, *Uchū Senshi Baldios*, *Tetsuwan Atom* (remake), *Uchū Taitei God Sigma*.

Sci-fi war anime have been discussed in a variety of contributions (Pellitteri 2008, Messina 2010, Fontana 2013), focusing especially on outstanding creators and series or films. Above all: Leiji Matsumoto and his producer Nishizaki Yushinobu for the *Uchū senkan Yamato* franchise; Nagai Gō and the Tōei Animation directors and scriptwriters for their co-authored robot series of the 1970s; Tomino Yoshiyuki, Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, Nagahama Tadao and the “Hajime Yatate” think tank for the robotic series they created together between 1977 and 1980.

### 3. Atomic and atomic-like weapons in anime in the 1970s-80s

The mushroom cloud became a cultural “meme” (Jouxte 2010). The big explosion became a ritual moment in almost every episode, as the climax in which the heroes defeat the evil robot or monster. It all starts with Tatsunoko’s *Gatchaman* in 1972, acquires strength in 1974 with Academy Productions’ *Uchū Senkan Yamato*, becomes a caricature (but not less powerful) in Tatsunoko’s *Time Bokan* series, reaches its peak between 1975 and 1982 with the success of robot anime, especially from Tōei’s *UFO Robo Grendizer* on.<sup>1</sup> In some anime, like Nippon Sunrise’s *Trider G7* (1980), the explosion is not always a mushroom: when the battles are fought in outer space, they assume a globular shape.

We must also consider feature films, TV specials and short films (cf. §3.1, §3.2, §3.3). We can identify in these works three kinds of graphic/thematic representation of destruction:

- 1) *the historical atomic explosions of August 1945;*
- 2) *fantasized atomic or non-atomic or pseudo-atomic or quasi-atomic mushroom explosions;*
- 3) *atomic or non-atomic non-mushroom explosions.*

#### 3.1 The animated representation of the inexpressible

##### *PIKA-DON (1978)*

The account of the dropping of “Little Boy” on Hiroshima and its infernal effects was made in animation for the first time by Kinoshita Renzō (1936-1997) and Sayoko (b. 1945) in this short film (10'). Its visual power and artistic accomplishment are difficult to describe rationally, because they speak to the audience with a graphic honesty which, to be fully appreciated, must be seen in the integral version of the film.

##### *HADASHI NO GEN, HADASHI NO GEN 2 (1983, 1985)*

Although the representation of the mushroom cloud of “Little Boy” on Hiroshima is shown only in the first film *Hadashi no Gen* directed by Mori Masaki (1941-1999), the long-lasting effects of the bomb are dealt with in the continuation of the story, by Hirata Toshio (b. 1938). The depiction of the atomic bomb in the first *Hadashi no Gen* is the most renowned in animation studies. It may be seen as inspired by *Pika-don*; both films were based on accounts of survivors. The insistence on the effects of the heat and air wave and radiations is willingly realistic, in order to be not only historically accurate but also emotionally compelling.

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<sup>1</sup> The previous giant robot series (1972-74) didn't show a mushroom explosion as a recurring image.

The explosion put on scene in this film has to be framed in the context of Japanese animation of the early 1980s, after about ten years during which there had been a quantity of sci-fi anime series. The design of mushroom clouds in 1970s sci-fi anime had till then been a simplification of the visual monstrosities that real atomic explosion clouds actually are. *Hadashi no Gen* can be intended as a new point zero of atomic explosions in animation.<sup>2</sup>

### *JUMPING (1984)*

This short film (6'22") by Tezuka Osamu (1928-1989) is one of his most acclaimed experimental works. It entirely consist in FP-POV movements which follow a little girl who makes higher and higher jumps. As the landscape and the situations continuously change, the jumper arrives in the middle of a sea war scenario where an atomic bomb explodes producing a big mushroom cloud which, although rendered in a slightly cartoonish style, is well-detailed and rather graphic and macabre.

### **3.2 Sci-fi TV anime series and the mushroom blast meme**

The first nuclear or, better, pseudo-nuclear blasts appeared in the series *Uchū senkan Yamato* (1974-5) by Leiji Matsumoto (b. 1938), Ishiguro Noboru (1938-2012) and Nishizaki Yoshinobu (1934-2010). A recurring trend of sci-fi anime was inaugurated: the mushroom explosions came from bombs which are not said to be atomic but are atomic-like as for power and effects. The producers and scriptwriters did not call them "atomic". In the case of *Yamato*, they are called "meteor bombs" and are launched from space by alien invaders.

The generation to which the aforementioned creators belong is the same of all the other main anime-makers active within this genre in the 1960-70s: they were all born between the late 1920s and the early 1940s. E.g. the Yoshida brothers (Tatsuo, Toyoharu and Kenji), founders of Tatsunoko, were born between 1932 and '42: they created or co-created many sci-fi series and one among the most famous, *Yattaman* (1975), features a ritual mushroom explosion at the climax of every episode, then turning into a skull-shaped cloud, filled with iconic and symbolic power.

### **3.3 Beyond the mushroom**

Ōtomo's movie *Akira* (1988) represents an aesthetic shift. Although the explosion at the beginning of the film is not said to be nuclear (it is in the original manga), its effects are those of an atomic bomb. The wave it generates is not an invisible energy that expands and then a mushroom-shaped cloud: the wave and cloud are one thing and have a hemispherical shape. Ōtomo created a symbol to convey the notion of a new kind of war, but the implicit reference to WWII remains steady. From *Akira* on there will not be anymore a constant reference to mushroom-shaped blast clouds<sup>3</sup> and there will be a wider use of the hemispherical explosion, not only in Japanese productions but also in American films.

In the 1990s the non-atomic or pseudo-atomic, non-mushroom-shaped blasts have been used in several occasions, for instance in the sci-fi TV series *Shinseiki Evangelion* (1995, by Anno Hideaki, Studio Gainax), with the so-called nuclear-like "N2" bombs.

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance *When the Wind Blows* (1986) by Jimmy Teru Murakami (1933-2014) and *Devilman: Kaichō Silen hen* (1990, by Iida Tsutomu, after the famous 1972 manga by Nagai Gō).

<sup>3</sup> Although they will still be occasionally used, for example in the aforementioned *Devilman* OVA of 1990, or in the visual prologue of the post-apocalyptic series *Hokuto no Ken* (1984-87).

One last kind of non-atomic, non-mushroom “explosion” is a metaphor or allegory. It is the case of Miyazaki Hayao’s movie *Kaze no Tani no Nausicaä* (1984, from his 1982-94 manga), where the weapons emerging from the remote past are the “invincible warriors”, biological robots invented in the previous era and now exhumed, capable to fire thermonuclear rays.

#### 4. Provisional conclusions

Explosions—as pyrotechnical devices—have also been used in Japanese live-action shows for kids; for example, since the first episode of the TV series *Himitsu Sentai Goranger* (1975).

The meanings of the cloud are multifaceted. For instance, in *Hokuto no Ken* and *Akira* the opening explosions serve to set the mood for dark and gritty post-apocalyptic stories.

The films by Kinoshita Renzō and Sayoko, Mori Masaki, Hirata Toshio and Tezuka Osamu came after the first TV anime series. From the conscious point of view of the creators of anime series for kids I have interviewed, the topic of the bombs and robot wars does not have anything to do with nationalism or with the bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was, on their honest opinion, an internal matter regarding the ways those animators decided to spectacularize the war among robots, aliens, humans, spaceships. Katsumata Tomoharu and Kinoshita Sayoko told me that in the 1970s animation producers, scriptwriters, directors, and animators mainly wanted to make spectacular explosions as special effects. However, we should not be convinced that this is the whole story. There might be something more behind: these animators, scriptwriters, directors and producers were all kids during the war. And in fact in the interviews with Katsumata, Hirata and Kinoshita interesting memories emerged. So one thing is listening to these creators’ conscious declarations and rationalizations, and another thing is trying to find connections between facts.

This is what I am currently doing in my ongoing research.

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